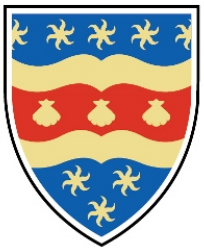

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EXPERIMENTS IN MATERIALITY AND REPRESENTATION: THE LONDON FILM-MAKERS' CO-OPERATIVE 1968 – 1979

by

CHARLOTTE REARDON

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of **Research Masters in Art History** has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

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ABSTRACT

Charlotte Reardon

EXPERIMENTS IN MATERIALITY AND REPRESENTATION: THE LONDON FILM-MAKERS' CO-OPERATIVE 1968 – 1979

My thesis is centered around the experimental films of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative. Through the shared workshop spaces and the vision to defy conventional mainstream cinema, the self-led collective was influential in creating new directions of filmic techniques. Placed within a wider discourse of 1970's experimental film, the aim of my research is to draw on the complexity of processes, narratives, and structures inherent in the Co-op films from 1968 – 1979. Through a technique-based examination, this project will focus on the shifts between abstracted and representational forms, and in turn how the dominant materialist practice began to be replaced by emerging critical feminist theories. Driven by a semiotically informed analysis of specific case studies, I will draw on a range of technical solutions to trace the changes in visual language. The Co-op's history and its position within the British avant-garde is well recorded, but the interplay the artists had between material and representational reflexivity is an aspect that can be further explored within scholarship surrounding the organisation.

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Introduction

> "The reasons why people adopt particular filmmaking techniques are often overlooked in critical appraisal of work. The relationship between filmmaker and equipment, and with film itself, is one of the foundations on which individual style is developed. It is frequently assumed that purely aesthetic decisions govern filming and editing choices at every stage, whereas all filmmaking practice is pre-formed by the amount of money available, what equipment one has access to and by the practical situation and social context in which one works."
>
> *Vanda Carter, Not Only Animation (Undercut Reader, 2003)*

The London Film-Makers' Co-operative – a self-led platform where artist could experiment, produce and distribute their own work – set the wave of independent film culture over the course of the 70's, 80's and 90's. The history of the Co-operative is one that is intrinsically linked to the entire structure of the British avant-garde and one that is connected to the development of today's artist moving image. The filmmakers associated with the Co-op were influential in pushing the boundaries of filmic processes and ultimately establishing experimental film towards an art medium in its own right: "many of the works fell into the netherworld between film and fine art, never really seeming at home in either cinema or gallery spaces."[1] There is no single manifesto that grouped the Co-op together but its overarching aesthetic and ethos emerged through the shared workshop spaces and the collective impulse to explore the possibilities of the medium. Away from institutional pressures, the Co-op evolved through labs based across London and developed equipment and experiments that came to define the organisation's identity;

> "The co-op model was proposed as radical and egalitarian: member-ship was open to all upon depositing a film for distribution. The 1968 LFMC constitution called for: 'provisions for liberal division of labour, and shared equipment and facilities."[2]

[1] Mark Webber, "Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film-maker's Co-operative & British Avant-garde film 1966 – 1976" Programme Notes, 2002 http://markwebber.org.uk/archive/tag/shoot-shoot-shoot/

[2] Matthew Noel-Tod, "Soft floor hard film," *Frieze,* 2016.

When the foundations of the LFMC were set in 1966, it was the influence from the American avant-garde that formed the co-operative model of a "non-selective agency for independent and experimental film."[3] From the developments of the New American Cinema Group, Jonas Mekas founded the New York Filmmaker's Co-operative in 1962; this artist-led distribution facility was structured through its egalitarian vision, open membership and rental fees that allowed the filmmakers to control their films and screenings. The London Co-op echoed this premise but soon established its distinctive network of production, distribution, and exhibition within one organisation. This structure allowed for the artists to run with a sense of freedom over experimentation and created control over all aspects of the filmmaking process.

Various models of the Co-op's constitution during the formative years set out the guidelines for its structure and membership. In 1968 the full annual membership cost filmmakers £4 which allowed access to facilities, screenings and films distributed through the library; filmmakers received 60% from film rentals, with 40% covering Co-op costs.[4] With the initial lack of institutional funding (the Co-op survived for nine years without outside funding), the workshop costs were balanced by the roles the members played in running and maintaining the facilities ,and through revenue made from the cinema club. As the model progressed, the Co-op was marked by more "entrepreneurial characteristics"[5] which proved to stabilise the organisation through policies, fees and allocated roles and staffing. The revisions to the Co-op's structure continued to expand the opportunities for its members and introduced a new environment in

[3] Mark Webber, "The First Decade of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative" in *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film Makers' Co-operative 1966-76,* ed. Mark Webber (London: LUX, 2016), 7.

[4] Draft Constitution for the LFMC, 1968' in *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film Makers' Co-operative*, 101. The 1976 revised constitution Leggett documents that this ratio had changed to 70% of rental costs to the makers, with the annual membership standing at £5, and cinema entry at £1. These adjustments to fees and costs can be traced through various notes of meetings, funding applications, etc. that are archived online through the FVDD.

[5] Malcolm Le Grice, "A New Constitution", 1975, http://www.studycollection.co.uk/auralhistory/part5.htm

which audiences could experience the ever-increasing circulation of both British and International independent films. By the mid-seventies, around fifty core members had created films in the workshops, the cinema club had over 1,300 members and the library held over 500 titles.[6] Over the course of the first decade, spaces, practices and dialogue developed, but throughout these changes, the key principles remained: an organisation "run by filmmakers for filmmakers."[7]

The formation of the Co-op is situated within the cultural climate of the sixties, a time of expanding educational systems and post-war economic growth. The changes to higher education (and the increased reach of subjects like fine art) meant many of the Co-op members came from art school backgrounds, seeking new ways to engage with art away from traditional media such as painting or sculpture. This engagement was deeply embedded with debates on culture and film, and how this could reflect, protest and challenge the wider social ideologies. 1960's London was characterised by a radical counterculture; the rise of left wing-politics and the politicised conditions against hierarchical structures of society, challenges to funding and limitations to social mobility created an era of liberation. This liberation was reflected through the underground scene where the LFMC became active, developing aesthetically driven experimentation that was ultimately underlined with anti-establishment politics. The Co-op's political sympathy was grounded within the very opposal of censored, consumerist cinema, and through experiments in materiality, the artists radically challenged the dominant bourgeois ideology.

[6] Mike Leggett, LFMC Summer Application to BFI, 1975, http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/LFMC750600.pdf. Deke Dubsinberres 1976 BFI application also outlines the Co-op's increasing membership and activity.

[7] Mike Leggett, LFMC Summer Application to BFI, 1975.

This material aesthetic of these artists' film came to define the LFMC, influenced from the socio-political motivations, and the cultural framing of the avant-garde scene. The parallel movement of the American avant-garde certainly held influence on the ethos of the Co-op, and films from both American and European filmmakers were well embedded within the Co-op's cinema programme. The abstract material nature of the Co-op films, alongside an increasing network of dialogue and debate, set them aside from the New York filmmakers, becoming more closely aligned with the European avant-garde that was both formally innovative and politically radical. The expanding structure of theory became interlined with the practice of the LFMC and this altered the landscape between the avant-garde's; "…lines were drawn, not according to national traditions, but along theoretical, aesthetic and political-economic grounds." [8] The loaded terminology that comes with trying to define the avant-garde movements will be unpicked in the first chapter. I will consider how notions of formalist and structural film set the distinct material approach of the period and how the retrospective application of the structural-materialist ideology came to define the Co-op's practice from the surrounding activities of the international avant-garde.

With the overarching aim to map the wider changes of visual language, my research is centred around the films created at the Co-op from 1968 – 1979, examining the processes, structures and narratives inherent in the group's first decade of activity. The technical and visual experiments hint towards the Co-op's intent to defy traditional cinematic conventions and to the direct role of the filmmaking process. My intention is to establish how, within these experiments, the parallel trends of materiality and representation became displaced, and how these two reflexive modes of filmmaking can be connected and identified. The LFMC's filmic

[8] Kathryn Siegel, "Conditions of Legibility: Reading and Writing the London Film-Makers' Co-operative, 1966 – 1976", in *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The Firest Decade of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative 1966-1976*, ed. Mark Webber (LUX: London, 2016): 19.

practices will be explored through specific (and chronologically informed) case studies, highlighting the transitions between process and content[9]; some works take on more abstracted forms, others explore thematic narratives through representation. Each film selected has been made accessible through the British Film Institute Online Player [10] – over seventy films from the Co-op are available to watch for free, without the need to hire equipment or space but this only presents a small sample of the analogue films made by the Co-op artists. Platforms like the BFI Player, and online collections such as LUX and Cinenova facilitate the opportunity for a widespread engagement between viewers and films. This archival expansion towards digital accessibility has been fundamental to establishing my research methods, yet it is important for me to recognise that the sample I have chosen has been restricted by the use of the BFI Player and the reliance on the digitised material. My decision to use this as a resource was guided by data availability and access. The restorative mode of transferring the originated films on celluloid to digital formats alters the viewing experience but offers an opportunity for repeated viewing of the Co-op material and the aesthetic implications of this data-gathering will be examined later in the text. I believe that this project presents a fair overview of the Co-op's output as key works have been consulted, but by no means is this thesis a comprehensive overview of the period.[11]

The thesis is split into three chapters, each section focusing on five works by different filmmakers. The fifteen films from the LFMC provides just a snapshot of the works being produced at the time; this selection has been constrained by the films available on the BFI Player but all of the works capture the different modes of filmmaking that were at play. The

[9] The acronym LFMC is commonly used in regards to the London Film-Makers' Co-operative; I will use both this form and the "Co-op" when referring by name to the organisation.

[10] LUX Online also provides extensive sources (captions, essays, artist profiles) on each of the Co-op films selected but films only available to rent at a cost.

[11] Not all works from the period were digitised, and the 70 online films compares to a library reaching up to 500 films, so there is an opportunity for me to expand on this archival work in future research.

first chapter focuses on the material practices between 1968 – 1974. Through works such as Malcolm Le Grice's *Spot the Microdot* (1969) and Guy Sherwin's *Cycles #1* (1972), I will examine the abstract film forms as the dominant narrative with the Co-op's work, noting techniques such as physical manipulation of film, direct animation and the role of the optical printer. The second chapter, capturing the same time frame, traces the parallel trends of materiality and representation apparent in films like Mike Leggett and Ian Breakwell's film *Sheet* (1970) and William Raban's *Angles of Incidence* (1973). The reflexive intentions, real referent and social narratives that were starting to mix were balanced through an expansion towards live performance, and multi-screen works. The growth of these forms and the filmic possibilities continued to develop from 1974-1979, but the third chapter will focus on how films such as Anne Rees Mogg's *Sentimental Journey* (1977) and Susan Stein's *G* (1979) drew on the self-reflexive possibilities of film. Moving from a solely formal approach to elements of representational reflexivity, the Co-op films became involved with more overtly social and political contexts, and became increasingly directed towards a feminist consciousness.

Questioning the play of these aesthetic and structural devices will start to map the shift in the filmmaking processes in the Co-op, considering how the transition towards more current feminist theories impacted the work being produced by the Co-op filmmakers. The wave of feminist optimism was deeply connected with the developing socio-political contexts. The Sixties marked events such as the introduction of female contraception and equal opportunities legislation and was heightened by a second wave of feminism that argued for equality in education and work. This set the momentum for the formation of the Women's Movement and organisations such as the London Women's Liberation Art Group (1970) and Women's Workshop (1972), as the seventies marked a "united voice of protest and a call for women's

rights in all areas of culture and the arts."[12] The response to the oppression of women from art institutions laid out the politically consciousness environment that many of the LFMC members found themselves in. The agency of activism, politics and aesthetics became signified through both material and representational modes of filmmaking, and feminist statements became implicit within these experiments. My research aims will lead me to consider when the dominant formalist experiments were replaced with evolving social and feminist emphasis, and how the filmic transitions are reflected within secondary literature, posing the question: has the exploration of representational reflexivity been overlooked?

Throughout my project it has been important to grasp how each film and artist were received, and how this has developed for a contemporary viewing of their work. Using the BFI Player as my main source has allowed me to narrow down the films selected for this thesis and to watch the works repeatedly. In this sense, the access to the films has worked to my advantage but it also has its limitations. Whilst making the work accessible, the digital mode in which I am watching is not how the Co-op filmmakers intended their work to be viewed. Part of the Co-op's ethos was challenging the way film could be experienced away from conventional modes of viewing and thus changing the role of the spectator. By removing themselves from traditional cinema spaces, the LFMC confronted the possibilities of production and have further questioned the possibility of new forms of reception. The experience of an audience watching a live projection of the original film artwork contrasts to the solitary viewing of the digital rendition of the work on my computer screen. The shift in format means that some of the physical qualities of film are lost; the filmic grain, light and contrast is not true to its original format, making it at times difficult to not misread the physical properties of the works.

[12] Lucy Reynolds, "Circulations and Co-operations: Art, Feminism and film in 1960's and 1970's London" in *London Art Worlds: Mobile, Contingent and Ephemeral Networks*, eds., Jo Aplin et al (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017) 133.

The primary autopsy for these films is particularly relevant to tracing the intentions of the authors, and the reflexiveness of the material. The BFI's online collection may change this approach, but the accounts I have made are transferable to a generic viewing experience and sufficient for a semiotic proposal. Instead of focusing on the material genesis of the films, my chief interest is the final projected product accessible to an ideal beholder. This concentrated approach, although has its limitations, does not invalidates the analysis in each case study, and does not alter the overall aim for mapping the visual changes of the Co-op films. The digital accessibility has made it possible to establish my own understandings, balancing the viewing experience by using the wealth of the artists' own writing and secondary literature to support this. The reliance on artists statements, interviews and the broad wealth of literature has set the basis for much of my secondary research and gaining insight into artistic intention. Many of the Co-op members are still actively creating work and shaping the narrative of artists' moving image but early on in the project I decided not to directly contact the filmmakers. This would have been out of the scope of the dissertation, which focused more on the semiotic aspects of the films.[14]

My methodology in this thesis will build on my own personal interpretations of the films and these observations will be informed by a semiology that can begin to unpick the complexities of the tensions between form, content, and context. Moving beyond purely visual forms, the trans-linguistic possibilities of the sign within semiotics can be applied to the changing codes

[14] Though direct interviews would have added another layer to my methodology, it ultimately does not alter the ideas that I am speculating. This explorative project, which is occupied with the abstract and visual works of the Co-op, can set the basis for a more thorough investigation through both interviews and targeted archival research.

of filmic imagery.[15] Semiosis can be transitioned to the Co-operative films through considering how the language of the films differ to the language of conventional cinema and through exploring the shifts between the structural existences and filmic realities. Semiosis is readily available as a mode of analysis to explore the Co-op films. The application of this paradigm within experimental film was established during the time, the LFMC was most active, and the revision of Semiotics as a theoretical framework can continue to connect the aesthetic threads of filmmaking, delving deeper than formalist modes of visual analysis and towards new origins of meaning and context that are attached to visual interpretations.

The reconstruction and disruption of images made possible through the technical solutions changes the interpretation of the signified and the signifier. The challenge to the illusionary mode of cinema exists in every case study; it is the reflexive use of materiality and representation that changed. The focus on reflexive forms and systematic processes builds a theory that pushes the limits of semiotic systems and the structural linguistics possible to consider the elements of filmmaking. It is also important for me to note the implications when discussing the 'context' of these films.[16] The concepts of form and content is not intended to be divisive split between the films but rather the language is used as a way of exploring the devices and how this may impact the use of material or representational modes.

[15] From Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* (1969) to Christian Metz' *Film Language: A Semiotics of Cinema* (1974) the 'language' of cinema had been introduced within critical film theory during the development of the Co-op.

[16] Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson (Semiotics and Art History, 177) "..."context" appears to have strong resemblances to the Saussurean signified, at least in those forms of contextual analysis that posit context as the firm ground upon which to anchor commentaries on works of art. Against such a notion, post-structuralist semiotics argues that "context" is in fact unable to arrest the fundamental mobility of semiosis for the reason that it harbors exactly the same principle of interminability within itself."

Whilst considering these factors, the thesis will largely draw on the wider contextual concerns within existing literature. Most of the critical works produced in the decade itself can be traced directly to the Co-op; each artist has almost provided a statement alongside their work, outlining their intentions which directly supports each case study I have made. This polemical and theoretical engagement serves as a cross between historic reference and contemporary reflection. The dominant discourses that developed can be mainly identified through the retroactive statements of practitioners Malcolm Le Grice and Peter Gidal. They both dominated the Co-op's development through publicising and theorising the work being produced, namely through previews of screenings, journal columns and lengthier critical publications.[17] Le Grice's *Abstract Film and Beyond* (1977) and Gidal's *Structural Film Anthology* (1976/1978) are the two key texts that have informed my research and are discussed at length in the first chapter, particularly in relation to the theoretical debates of the British avant-garde. Although these works developed during the latter of the decade, formulating beyond the prominent material moments, this polemical thinking guided much of the initial activity of the Co-op and the discourse on experiments in materiality.

The contexts surrounding the artists instigate much of the material and thematic changes, the image signification altering within a different social framework. Dominant works on experimental film such as David Curtis' *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain* (2006), A.L Rees' *A History of Experimental Film and Video: from the canonical avant-garde to contemporary British practice* (1999) and Patti Gaal-Holmes' *A History of 1970s Experimental Film: Britain's Decade of Diversity* (2014) become key points of reference in mapping the empirical history of the group and its placement within the British avant-garde. Specifically to

[17] Noam M. Elcott, "Structural Integrity: Noam M. Elcott on Peter Gidal and the LFMC", *Art Forum*, (2016): 84.

the Co-op (and following the 2015 *Shoot Shoot Shoot* exhibition at Tate Britain), Mark Webber's *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film-Makers Co-operative 1966-1976* (2016) meticulously maps the initial activity of the group and Webber's account confirms the Co-op's position within the growing counterculture of the 1970's.[18] Much of the social history and ideologies reflected in *Shoot Shoot Shoot* (2016) refers to archival documentation and accounts from the Co-op artists themselves. This contribution from the LFMC is also reflected within *The Undercut Reader: Critical Writings on Artists' Film and Video* (2003), a collection of essays taken from *Undercut,* the journal that was published by the Co-op from 1989-1990 that intended to work "within the space that exists between art's discourse as art and art discourse as politics."[20] The 2003 anthology provides further context to the developing theories within avant-garde film and the added five contemporary reflections transitions to a more critical stance on themes of identification, feminist perspectives and politics, expanding the growing theoretical engagement of the Co-op.

Expanded contemporary research on the development of critical thinking and feminist film theories provides a backdrop for how the Co-op's work can be reflected through a framework other than the formal materialist agenda. The increasing network of women's groups across London and the UK called attention to the political signification of cultural "connections between oppression and command of language"[19], and created a platform where Co-op filmmakers could challenge the settings in which they were working, and the way in which they were represented. The dominance of male voices within the organisation was synonymous of the tensions that were entering into the avant-garde towards the late seventies. Chapter 3 will examine how the filmic transitions towards representational reflexivity redefined the role

[18] Both Webber's publication, and the 2015 exhibition evolved from the *Shoot Shoot Shoot* touring film programme that first launched in 2002.

[19] Laura Mulvey, "Film Feminism and the Avant-Garde" in *British avant-garde film 1926-1995: an anthology of writings*, ed. Michael O'Pray, (1996): 201.

of female filmmakers, and the impact this had on the dynamic of the Co-op. The wider contextual influences became reflected through exploration of the medium that considered the plurality of gender narratives, deconstructed the idea of the gaze, and addressed the problematic working of representation. The implicit tones of feminist consciousness evident in the practical experiments are supported by an increasing amount of texts (both during the time and retrospectively) that recognised the impact of gender specific work.

This thesis follows on from the changing focus that is beginning to redefine the Co-op's history. The contextual and critical research has directly informed the visual methodologies that underpins my research. Through semiotics, social art history and emerging feminist narratives, I aim to build upon the extensive scope of research to form new interpretations. All of the films embody the undertones of the radical experiments that came from the Co-op, and the case studies I have constructed are informed by the broader discourses that trace particular trends of form and the way the story of the organisation is told. It not intended to create a timeline of a linear history of the Co-op's work or to reduce films into opposing categories of abstraction or representation. Instead, it is hoped that through examining the reflexive lenses through the network of techniques, themes and contexts, these two modes of filmmaking can trace the changes in reflexive intentions and evolve the understanding of the LFMC films produced within the 1970's framework.

Chapter 1: Experiments in Materiality 1968-1974

"What may appear didactic concern with the chemistry of the medium is an essential landmark in an overdue, radical re-examination of the nature of the film."

Annabel Nicholson, Artist as Film-maker, 1972

The title "Experiments in Materiality" refers to the dominant narrative that underpinned much of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative's earliest intentions. These formative years were driven by the focus on the materiality of the filmmaking process which manifested through abstract forms and sequential and perceptual structures. The extensive scope of processes inherent in film were explored by the Co-op artists, ranging from flicker effects and loop printing, to direct physical manipulation of the filmstrip. Control of frame speeds, image repetition, heightened contrasts, and permutations of colour moved the exploration of materiality further away from mainstream cinematic conventions. The interplay of these structural and technical solutions brought a new context to the materiality of film, and it was from the late 1960's and early 70's where the artists established their means of experimentation, production and distribution.

The Co-op's engagement with materiality and anti-narrative structures is well embedded within its own defining history. This chapter will centre on films created between 1968 and 1974, considering the material reflexivity that set the foundations for the changing practical and theoretical positions of the artists. All of the filmmakers selected were theoretically active in the 70's, shaping the understanding of their own works, and the wider developments of the Co-op's activity. The roles between artist and writer were becoming redefined; alongside the films themselves, this primary material begins to act as a prescriptive manifesto of each artists

intentions, contextualised on the ground when the works were made, exhibited and distributed. I can draw from this depth of existing literature, whilst exploring the contemporary scholarship that theorises and frames the filmmaking practices.

Each case study outlines key phenomena of this type of experimental film, techniques often overlapping and imposing a particular way of being part of the Co-op. *Spot the Microdot* (1969) by Malcolm Le Grice shows the repetitive action of the filmmaker punching holes directly through the 16mm film stock, a flicker effect forming as a result of the physical manipulation. In Guy Sherwin's *Cycles #1* (1972), the material of the film is also physically changed but rather than reducing the surface, paper dots have been stuck onto the filmstrip. The perceptual challenge of the flicker effect is then heightened by the relationship between the optical sound and visual imagery. *Shepherd's Bush* (1971) by Mike Leggett, is structured by a short piece of found footage being loop printed, each repetitive loop altering in light and contrast. *Lenseless* (1971) by John Du Cane is another work that shows the manipulation of light to form the aesthetics and structure of a film. After the removal of the camera lens, the film stock is repeatedly moved past the camera at different speeds creating light patterns across the frames. Both *Shepherd's Bush* and *Lenseless* show the understanding of light as part of the filmmaking process, and the complicated constructions that come from the printing process. David Crosswaite's *Film No.1* (1971) also places a focus on the varying printing techniques, such as repetition, permutations of colour and loop printing. Any representation imagery is challenged through the exploration of the filmic process.

Through making the avant-garde the dominant narrative, the LFMC constructed and set up their own systems in which their works were produced. The films decoded and reimagined cinema's relationship with content and form, pushing the growing concern for *film as film*. The idea of film as film, although perhaps limited in its referential notion, provides a context which

became associated with formalist, Structural and Structural/Materialist film.[20] The complexity of these terms can be identified so as to clearly unpack the critical and historical application of certain modes of practice. The early practitioners of avant-garde film such as Kenneth Anger and Stan Brakhage were reliant on concepts of myth and metaphor, with the films' form developing from the reconciling elements of the content. This personal and poetic nature of formalist cinema was later displaced by filmmaking that was centered around the films form, shape and structure, becoming devoid of the complexity of any thematic content. Structural Film came to define the American aesthetic, outlined by P. Adams Sitney's 1969 text that prescribed four characteristics (fixed camera, flicker effect, loop printing and rephotography) to the term. These techniques moved towards works that were invested in and determined by the films form, instead of the formal devices used symbolically as a method to show content.

With Sitney's preoccupation with the concern for shape and duration came a change in the discourse of the avant-garde and subsequent challenges to the formulation of structural film. In his 1976 essay *St George in the Forest*, Deke Dusinberre identified the shift towards a 'structural asceticism' in which notions of transcendence or image duality (reality and illusion) were replaced in favour of the material solution that rejects all illusionism and effaces the very cinematic image.[21] This asceticism became define as Structural-Materialism, a notion that was intrinsically linked to the overarching concern of the Co-op and further cemented the groups position within the evolving British avant-garde. Through Peter Gidal's *Structural Film Anthology* (1976/1978) the Structural/Materialist position became understood in relation to

[20] Peter Gidal (Materialist Film, 1989, 20) regarding the notion 'film as film': "This dangerous formulation of mine from 1971 was wrongly taken to mean that film's essential nature was the proper area of investigation for avant-garde/experimental film. It was never up to the structural/materialist filmmaker to recover films' essential nature, i.e. film as film. If anything, it is *a* film's concrete existence which must interest; its possibilities of militating against transparency; its presentation/formation of processes of production which have as their uses meanings constructed by, through, and *for*."

[21] Deke Dusinberre, St George In the Forest, in *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative 1966-1976,* 20.

films that refer to their own production and an increased materialism.[22] The materialist notion redefined Structural Film's relationship with medium specificity, completely rejecting any ideas of metaphor or illusion, and aligned the British avant-garde with a Marxist dialectic materialism that fed into the tones of the surrounding political climate of the late sixties.

Even though published beyond the chronological boundary of this chapter, Gidal's theoretical work is one of the key publications to understanding the defining ideas of the period. In his essay *Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film* (1975), Gidal coins the term Structural/Materialist in relation to films that refer to its own production and material process;

> "...the in/film (not in/frame) and film/viewer material relations, and the relations of the film's structure, are primary to any representational content. The structuring aspects and the attempt to decipher the structure and anticipate/recorrect it, to clarify and analyse the production-process of the specific image at any specific moment."[23]

The use of specific formal devices to unravel both a films' material and construct became the primary working of Structural/Materialist film. This attempt came before any focus on the specific shape, "otherwise the discovery of shape may become the theme, in fact, the narrative of the film".[24] For Gidal, this was the distinctive divide between Structural/Materialism and Structural Film and validated the need to refine a materialist alternative to Sitney's proposal.[25] *Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film* underlines many of the filmic processes and non-illusionist intentions under concepts such as symbolic reconstruction/deconstruction, codes of narrativity and reflexiveness which is "forced through cinema's materialist operations

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[22] Gidal uses both capitalised (Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film, 1975) and non-capitalised forms (Materialist Film, 1989) but I will be following Gidal's earlier text as my source.

[23] Peter Gidal, "Theory/Definition of Structural/Materialist Film" in *Structural Film Anthology*, ed. Peter Gidal (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 6.

[24] Gidal, *Structural Film Anthology,* 1.

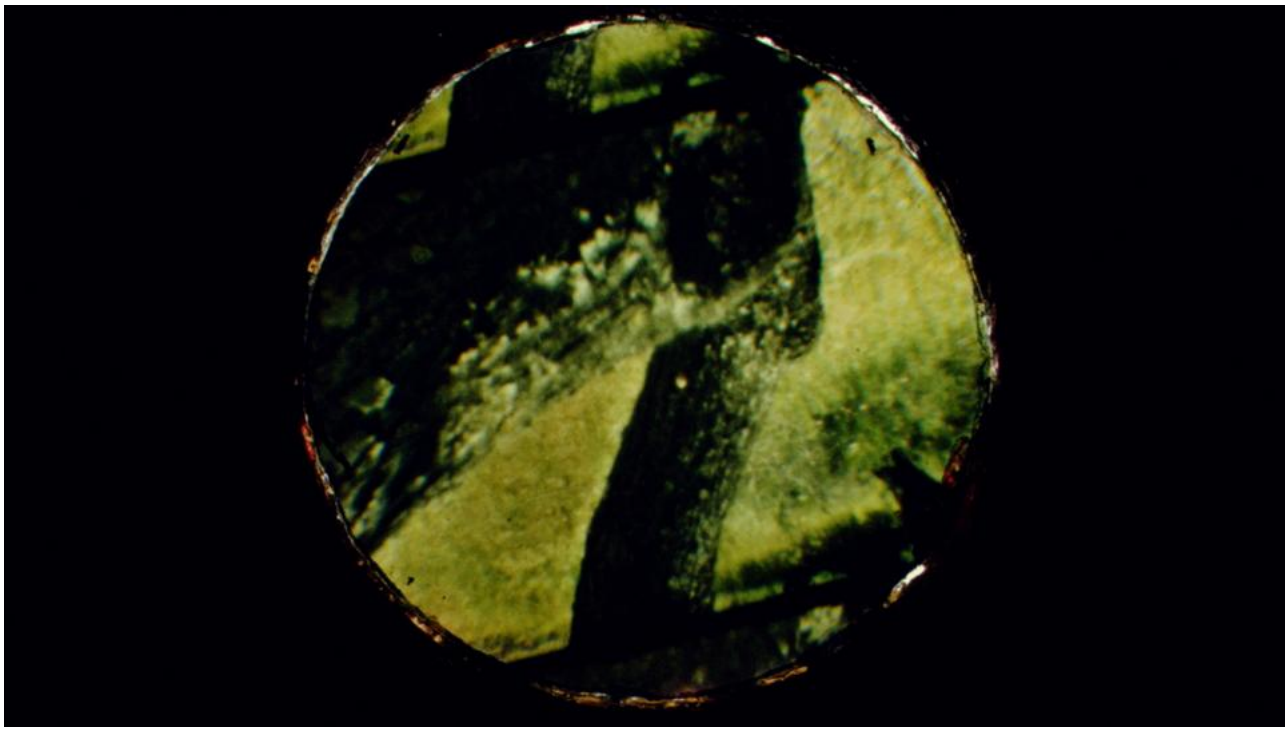
[25] Dusinberre notes how Structural Film is marked by a films' duration, invested with a main goal, complexity or transcendental quality that was marked by more than just the films' shape or structure, despite Sitney's claim of the simplicity of the films form.

of filmic practice." [26] Gidal lists many of the Co-op artists as working under Structural/Materialist practice such as Le Grice, Roger Hammond, David Crosswaite and Gill Eatherley. Most of the essays contained in *Structural Film Anthology* blur between visual and contextual approaches, but this introductory essay specifically highlights the importance of semiotic notions within materialist practice. These central concerns were formed through specific devices that reconstructed and deconstructed the structure and symbols within films. Devices such as repetition and changes in speed or duration, directly disrupt and confront the systems of meaning and association; Gidal introduces the idea that the "whole idealist system is opposed by a materialist practice of the production of meaning, of the arbitrariness of the signifier. (Meaning is *made.)* And for this concept, this thought, the semiotic notions of signifier/signified are of tremendous importance."[27] This disruption between the signifier and signified can also follow the Peircean system of the signifier being split into three main categories; Icon, Index and Symbol. In its simplest sense, Icon is based on resemblance; Index on the physical evidence of existence; and Symbol extended to the wider context.[28]

Many of the Co-op's non illusionist intentions trace the films' process but not all materialist gestures are solely indexical; "indexical signifier is not tied to resemblance, but is none the less characterised by its form being a direct physical consequence of that which produces it."[29] By considering the links to the icon and the index, it leads to an open question as to how the signs function within the material experiments by these Co-op filmmakers. The changes between form and content move past purely visual forms and towards the understanding of artistic

[26] Gidal, *Structural Film Anthology*, 10.
[27] Gidal, *Structural Film Anthology*, 8.
[28] Peircean semiotics moved away from the linguistic foundations set by Saussure. Saussure's binary semiology was based from the connections between a sign and the belief that language intentionally constructs reality. For Pierce, this reality lies outside the internal systems of language and his Semiotics focused on the expanded possibility of the existence of signs, using three typologies: sign (or representament), the mental image (or Interpretant) and the Object (or referent).
[29] Malcolm Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in a Digital Age (*London: BFI, 2001), 92.

intention, social context, and how this meaning of the experience is possible. The reference to the indexical sign and the physicality of film goes beyond just a surface reflexivity, questioning "the way signification conventionally works to fix meaning through systems of reference."[30] As evident within this literature, Semiotics is not defined by medium and although their theories avoid direct attention to a singular artist or film, Gidal gives an indication of how experimental film can be explored under a semiotic system. Rather than reducing the work of the filmic process, the consideration of medium specificity starts to extend the understanding of the films.[31]



Malcolm Le Grice, Spot the Microdot, 1969.

[30] Gillian Swanson, "Messages'; a film by Guy Sherwin", in *The Undercut Reader: Critical Writings on Artists' Film and Video*. Ed., Nina Danino and Michael Maziere (New York: Wallflower Press, 2002), 70.

[31] Nicky Hamlyn (Medium Practices, 2011) a former Co-op member, starts to challenge the assertion that medium specific practice entail a commitment to a reductive kind of formalism; "Question of media specificity examining works that could have not existed other than in the medium they were made."

Spot the Microdot (1969) by Malcolm Le Grice captures the type of work that came to define this earliest period of the Co-op. The film was "handmade by punching circular holes into fully opaque 16mm film stock at rhythmic intervals."[32] Seemingly created using a hole punch, the repetitive action appears to move across the filmstrip and the simple abstract form draws attention to the opaque qualities of the film. The tactile relationship in *Spot the Microdot* is further evident as the handmade film only exists in film form as an original moving image artwork; "only the original copy of this film exists – it cannot be printed is therefore projected only on rare occasions."[33] A telecine transfer of the film to a video format or a digital scan of the original filmstrip will have been made to enable the work to be viewed through the online British Film Institute Player.

The rhythmic movement is inconsistent, the systematic intervals and the physical contact heightened by the sound of the action itself, caused by the reaction to the "light-resistant magnetic sound recording stock."[34] The film predominately consists of a black and white interchange, with discs of colour film moving into the abstract space. The irregularity of the movement and the speed in which coloured discs film flashes on the screen, reinforces the impact of what the viewer is seeing. The effect is almost subliminal, and it is the use of the fully opaque film stock that allows for "the maximum difference between image and the absence of it."[35] Moments of found imagery filter in, most apparent at around seven minutes, but any context of representation is altered by the speed of the single frame durations and the high contrasts.

[32] Spot the Microdot, BFI Player, 2019.
[33] Spot the Microdot, BFI Player, 2019.
[34] Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond* (London: MIT Press, 1977), 107.
[35] Malcolm Le Grice, Spot the Microdot, LUX Online, https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/malcolm_le_grice/spot_the_microdot.html

Far from just aesthetically radical, it is the physicality of the movement created by Le Grice that highlights the materiality of the filmmaking process. Any form of narrative or illusionism is abandoned, the structural experience established through the motion of the rhythmic patterns that move from frame to frame. *Spot the Microdot* can be applied within the area of direct animation, a mode of film in which the visualisation and structural devices are formed through direct contact with the filmstrip. In direct animation the "filmmaker is concerned intimately with the component parts of moving image, the individual frames of space and increments of time in a 'broken-down' form, and their constitution in a synthesised form as an illusory stream of moving images."[36] It is this attention on the camera-less manipulations of the filmmaker that moves abstract film towards the illusionary compositions that actively challenge optical perceptions of movement; the frame by frame focus creates the illusion of time passing and structures the films percieved reality. The film's entirety consists of the indexical aspect and it is the condition of materiality that records the trace of existence, a direct result of the repetitive movement and maximum contrasts on the film stock. This complex interplay highlights the physical qualities of the film, with the abstract circular form at the centre of linking the mechanical procedures to the reflexive material exploration and the direct intervention from the artist.

The reflexivity and systematic structuring within *Spot the Microdot* also enters into a whole area of perceptual film or flicker film. "Since 1966, the perceptual problem in cinema has become a fairly clear area of study"[37] and Le Grice attributes this development to specific works within the American and European avant-garde such as Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966), Paul Sharit's *Ray Gun Virus*, and his own work *Spot the Microdot*. The application of

[36] Kayla Parker, "Every Frame Counts: Creative Practice and Gender in Direct Animation," PhD diss., (Plymouth University, 2015), 25.

[37] Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond*, 107.

this term can be applied where a film "attempts to examine, or create experience through devices which work on the autonomic nervous system."[38] and this perceptual impact is considered through the work of Le Grice and other members of the Co-op. The experience of effects such as flicker, strobic, loop and image repetition form the reflexive aspect of these perceptual systems and reconstructs the images and materiality of the sign in front of the viewer. Le Grice's physical action and awareness of the camera's mechanics and the formal devices are key in altering the optical experience.

> "Cinema, as a mechanism, is designed to project one separate picture every 1/24 second. If the period during which the projection shutter is closed is taken into account, each image occupies the screen for approximately half that time, about 1/50 second, while the rate of image change in film is deliberately located just beyond the point where the eye can discern flicker."[39]

By examining the rates of changes and increasing "the ratio of dark to light frames in increments of 1/24 second"[40] *Spot the Microdot* forces the viewer to recognise this flicker effect. The mechanics of sequential forms and high contrasts between these frame builds the intensity of the effect. The reflexiveness operates through the distinct way in which the films material properties connect, from the repetition of the punched hole to the flashes of imagery. This kind of conscious reflexivity depends on the repeated movements; "the permutative as the endless of the return of the same/seeing same, produces the need (here is where reflexivity comes in) to decipher / arrest the image and structure."[41]

Much of Le Grice's writings controlled the almost strict formalist ideas that developed from the workshops and the growing understanding on abstract film from 1966. Becoming the most recognisable voice from the Co-op, the extensive body of his theoretical work served not only

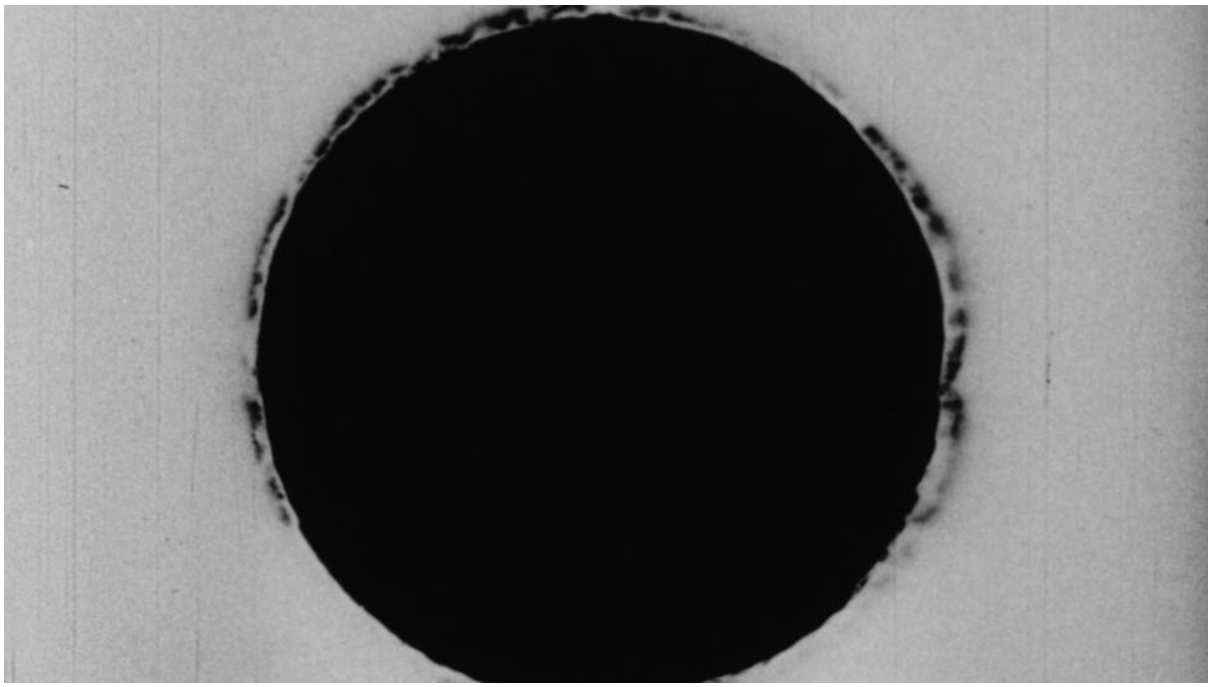
[38] Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond*, 105.
[39] Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond*, 106.
[40] Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond*, 106.
[41] Peter Gidal, *Materialist Film* (London: Routledge, 1989), 147.

as “personal statements but as a definitive of the concerns of the work being undertaken at the LFMC at the time.”[42] Le Grice’s *Abstract Film and Beyond* (1977) was one of the first dominant texts published during the seventies and along with Gidal’s *Structural Film Anthology*, these two leading texts are referenced as sources for materialist ideas throughout the 1970‘s era of filmmaking. *Abstract Film and Beyond* highlights the reflexive intention within abstract film and the theoretical thinking that surrounded these changes in form. Le Grice traces a long history of alternate cinema from the earliest abstract film of Corra and Ginna to American postwar films, but Le Grice’s chapter *Around 1966* which marks the start of the Co-op forming. Although the format of the London Film-Maker's Co-operative is not explicitly mentioned, Le Grice references the shift of a new generation of artists that includes many of the Co-op members such as Peter Gidal, William Raban, Gill Eatherley and Lis Rhodes. He identifies the sequential and perceptual forms of films such as flicker, strobic effects, loop and image repetition and references the reflexive aspects of systemic structuring. Le Grice also examines the question of motion analysis/synthesis, the reconstruction of images and the materiality of the sign. *Abstract Film and Beyond* does hint towards the formal properties of films but the continuous focus on reflexive forms and systematic processes builds a theory that pushes the limits of semiotic systems.

Spot the Microdot and the evolving studies of direct animation and perceptual forms set the tone for how the image transformations would dictate the language of the film. Rather than trying to interpret or follow a narrative, the impact is instead on awareness of the autonomic response and the changing material and temporal patterns. The attention to filmic properties and the intervention of the filmmaker forms the experience of the film but the semantic issues are not entirely avoided; “the image, however abstract, is read associatively and signifies,

[42] Kathryn Seigel,“Conditions of Legibility” in *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film Makers' Co-operative 1966-76,* 26.

produces and takes on meaning."[44] The signification within the Le Grice's and the Co-op's early formal work is directly linked to the reflexive nature of the films, rather than held with the image itself. [45] The abstract form and perceptual systems are emulated in Guy Sherwin's



Guy Sherwin, Cycles, 1972

Cycles #1 (Dot Cycle 1972/1977*)*. The flicker effect is created by the increasing ratio of dark to light frames, the changes between each frame made by Sherwin sticking an additional layer of paper dots onto the surface of the film. As with *Spot the Microdot*, the movement of the circular abstract form is the focal point of the perceptual activity, but the two methods are very distinct. Rather than a circular portion of the films surface being removed and then refilled with fragments of colour and other film, the small paper circles are stuck onto the filmstrip. The space between the abstract form decreases until the "the separate image-moments coalesce into

[44] Malcolm Le Grice, "The History We Need," in *Film As Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910-1975*, Exhibition Catalogue, Arts Council of Great Britain (1979), 116.

[45] The title itself also is loaded with various readings; audiences of the time would be familiar with spot the ball competitions that appeared in many papers, whilst a microdot was also a name for LSD in the form a small pill that was around in the 60s and 70's. The microdot could also be a reference to a piece of microscopic film containing (secret, and perhaps encoded) information that was associated with the Cold War.

a pulsating ball of light."[46] Through the physical manipulation, *Cycles #1* reconstructs the perception of imagery and the material transformations and perceived movement are controlled by Sherwin increasing the light through the Debrie contact printer. The equipment allows for "positive prints to be made from copy negatives"[47] and for control of the speed of exposure, light adjustments and colour filters. The mechanical changes of contrasts and frequency alters the dot so that the "retinal afterimages are anticipated, reiterated, reinforced or counteracted in the image on screen,"[48] and introduces hints of colour within a monochromatic scale that is dominant. The grain and pattern on the surface of the film stock provides the illusion of movement and it is the flashes between each frame that creates the play between visual aesthetics and the technology. The contact printer was "capable of printing an optical soundtrack onto the edge of the film"[49] with the interference of the dots on the surface of the filmstrip forming the audio. "Simultaneously we hear rhythmic sounds fusing into a continuous rising drone"[50] and by electing to create this alongside the visual imagery, the traditional cinematic cues of narration and dialogue are completely avoided.

Cycles #1 is just one in a series of optical sound films made by Sherwin that focuses on the relationship between sound and image. As with many of the Co-op artists', Sherwin has produced theoretical work outlining his process. Referring to *Cycles #1*, he notes the sensory impact on the viewer;

> "Apparently, we register time through our optical and our aural senses in very different ways, one chemical, the other mechanical. Visual information can only be 'processed' at a maximum of 12 separate samples (frames) per second, whereas with sound our

[46] Guy Sherwin, Cycles #1, LUX Online. https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/guy_sherwin/cycles_1__(aka_dot_cycle).html

[47] Mike Leggett, "LFMC Workshop: Early Experimentation with Printer and Processor." in *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film Makers' Co-operative 1966-76,* 110.

[48] Nicky Hamlyn, *Film Art Phenomena* (London: BFI, 2003), 63.

[49] Mike Leggett, "LFMC Workshop: Early Experimentation with Printer and Processor," 110.

[50] Guy Sherwin, Cycles #1, BFI Player, 2019.

> sensitivity is greater, up to 30 per second. Below these frequencies we can distinguish separate moments in time, above them we can't."[51]

Similarly to Le Grice, Sherwin demonstrates the depth of understanding the LFMC had on the techniques and technology used in their process. Another example of direct animation, *Cycles #1* is dependent on the projection of light from the filmstrip to the screen, "which are present in a successive order on the filmstrip and only convey the impression of continuity and movement through the process of reproduction."[52] It is the reproduction that reconstructs the image, extending the filmmaker's relationship with the film's material basis. This understanding of perception and the mechanisms possible through the medium was further pushed by Sherwin though his series work, live performances and reworking of films. Films such as *Cycle #1*, were later reworked; in 1977 a "secondary rhythmic layer was added to the original film by printing two of these cycles through a varying aperture"[53], creating oscillating levels of light and dark. Sherwin later produced *Cycles #3* (1972/2003) that moves from the original single screen to a two-projector film performance. The two copies of Cycles were projected out of sync, so that "one film is decelerating while the other is accelerating"[54] adding to the vivid perceptual experience.

The visual and mechanical effects become linked but through using the 16mm projector (to convert light into the optical sound), the sensory interventions add another element to the fluidity of the process. *Cycles #3* shows the extent in which the Co-op was able to push the conventional practice of cinematic viewing and the mode in which films were exhibited and screened. The different approaches to viewing mainstream films versus artists' film are evident

[51] Guy Sherwin, Cycles #1, LUX Online https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/guy_sherwin/cycles_1__(aka_dot_cycle).html

[52] Yvonne Spielmann, *Video: A Reflexive Medium* (London: MIT Press, 2008), 3.

[53] Nicky Hamlyn and Vicky Smith, *Experimental and Expanded Animation: New Perspectives and Practices* (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2018), 148.

[54] Nicky Hamlyn and Vicky Smith, *Experimental and Expanded Animation*, 148.

within the collective actions of the organisation. In the evolving use of the Co-op space, "new roles were explored for maker, for viewer and for the space – the viewing space, be it cinema or installation, live performance or film projection – which stands between them."[55] By removing themselves from traditional cinema spaces, the Co-op confronted the possibilities of production and further questioned the possibility of new forms of reception.

In the year before *Cycles #1*, Mike Leggett produced *Shepherd's Bush* (1971). The film was also worked using the "Debrie Matibo printer's neutral densities and aperture band"[56], allowing for the "precise control of light."[57] The manipulation of light, exposure, contrast and repetition again becomes the focus of this material experimentation. Purely monochromatic, the frames start completely black, and it is only halfway through the 15 minutes film that the grainy footage and abstracted forms jump forward as the contrast and tonal ranges alter. The image from an existing stock becomes the start of the filmmaking process, the "10 second length of raw footage"[58] looped and repeated creating the filmic structure. Each time the footage was reprinted, Leggett negotiated a stark change in contrast; the films' last five minutes consists of bright white light that nearly fills the screen with only flashes of dark suggesting any continued motion. Alongside the constant visual changes is a rhythmic pattern of sound that acts at the accompanying soundtrack. Leggett used "a primitive synthesiser to set up a pulsating sequence that is gradually modulated by changing the parameters of audio filters,"[59] the pitches get increasingly lower and eventually reduce in intensity, moving with the visual transformations.

[55] A. L. Rees "Locating the LFMC: The First Decade in Context", LUX, 2016.

[56] Shepherd's Bush, LUX Online, https://lux.org.uk/work/shepherds-bush. Further notes published through LUX (catalogue notes for Shepherd's Bush by Mark Webber) outlines that the film was "originally conceived as a systematic calibration test of the new step-printer."

[57] Mike Leggett, "Draft Notes on Shepherd's Bush,"1971 http://www.mikeleggett.com.au/projects/shepherds-bush

[58] Mark Webber, "Catalogue Notes for Shepherd's Bush", 2006, http://www.mikeleggett.com.au/sites/default/files/Shepherd%E2%80%99sBushWebber.pdf

[59] Mark Webber, "Catalogue Notes for Shepherd's Bush", 2006.

Shepherd's Bush is well recorded within secondary literature in terms of its conceptual concerns, highlighting how the relationship with the filmic process controlled much of the key works being produced in the workshops at the time. It is also a film that commands an active role of the audience and signals towards the protest of passive consumption. Leggett

Mike Leggett, Shepherd's Bush, 1971.

himself notes that "the film has two contexts which suggests two attitudes to film, myself and the spectator." [60] This stance from Leggett and the Co-op aimed to form a direct communication between the film, filmmaker and viewer, which in turn links to the reflexivity of the recording, printing and deconstructions of filmic codes. As with *Cycles #1*, the editing, developing and printing equipment in the LFMC labs allowed for these deconstructions to happen. Through the optical and contact printers, the filmmakers had control over the light, grain and time of each frame and methods used to stretch the structure of the film, from loop printing and rephotographing the film. The footage in *Shepherd's Bush* is repeated using loop

[60] Mike Leggett, "Draft Notes on Shepherd's Bush", 1971.

printing, where the filmstrip is fed through the printer numerous times. Through the printing processes and the 16mm industrial format film, artists like Leggett created their own experimental conventions, the "analogue basis of the medium gave tactile opportunities for intervention of the filmmaking process."[61] The editing and use of the printer is at the centre of these transformations; "the systematic or structural aspect of this film is again partly directed towards the appreciation of duration through attention of minimal developments in the image."[62]

Duration is a recurring consideration throughout the Co-op's work and a key component within the perceptual activity of experimental film. "In Film, duration as material piece of time is the basic unit"[63]; through shots and sequences, the repeated duration of the recording in *Shepherd's Bush* attempts to form a link to the films structure and the films process and highlight the filmic transformations. The context of the recording duration in this case is almost distorted by the intense motion of the footage in real time. The connection "between the duration of the event recorded and the duration of the film representation of that event"[64] is an important focus on the construction or deconstruction of the process. In *Shepherd's Bush* the minimal changes of the image are balanced by the quick motion of the recording, the structure of the film shows its connection with temporality. This motion not only refers to the durational continuity but to the physical presence of the recording. This trace means that film can achieve an "autonomous presence without negating iconic reference because the phenomenology of the system includes 'recording' as a physical fact."[65] Although Leggett has used existing footage, the role of

[61] Mark Webber, *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film Makers' Co-operative 1966-76,* 108.
[62] Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond*, 136.
[63] Gidal, *Structural Film Anthology*, 8.
[64] Malcolm Le Grice, "After Image" in *Materialist Film*, 117.
[65] Paul Sharis, "Words Per Page Film Culture" in *Experimental Film and Video: An Anthology*, ed. Jackie Hatfield (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2015): 44.

recording plays an integral part of the filmmaking process. The fast-moving action of the camera, or the removal of the camera lens, acts as the initial structure for the printing process to build from. The Co-op were continually broadening the equipment that they could use from recording, printing, processing and editing devices. For Leggett and most of the LFMC's experiments, the recording and printing processes were intrinsically linked. Films like *Spot the Microdot* by Le Grice are the exception; the 16mm film was projected rarely, but no initial recording was made to create the original moving image artwork. Indeed, the recording process came later, when the work was recorded and the format converted and digitised for viewing on platforms like the BFI Player.

David Crosswaite's *Film No. 1* (1971) is a further example of the interplay of techniques explored through the recording and printing processes. The film is structured by sequences of light, contrasts and abstract imagery moving through four quadrants. Crosswaite would have initially used an "unsplit 8mm film, which results in four images being projected simultaneously when shown in 16mm"[66] and it is the conscious decision to keep the 8mm as it originally begins (as a roll of 16mm wide film) that takes a simple formatting process into the centre of a film's content. The use of the optical printer is also key to *Film No.1*'s production, as through using "alternating mattes"[67], varying areas of the film's emulsion are blocked and exposed at different moments. This allows for the different elements of light and imagery to move within the distinct split of the four abstract parts. The alternating exposure begins to form the sequential movement ; the main forms that are worked through this structuring are two repeated visuals. The first depicts the lights from traffic at night, the other is "a kind of barbed circle, at times 'stationary' and others spinning and swirling."[68] The distortion is created by

[66] P Gaal-Holmes. *A History of 1970s Experimental Film* (London: Palgrave, 2015), 148.
[67] Film No. 1, BFI Player, 2019.
[68] Gaal-Holmes, *A History of 1970s Experimental Film*, 148.

both the continuous movement of the imagery itself, and the movements between the lights and contrasts on the frame. Along with the constant visual alterations, "a soft whirring, rhythmic sound is heard"[69], adding to the intensity of films structural system.

David Crosswaite, Film No.1, 1971.

The work starts completely monochrome and then at around five minutes, changes into hues of greens, pinks, reds and yellows. The dyeing of the black and white film adds a new dynamic to *Film No.1* and the possibilities of the image transformations. This is also heightened through the images transferring between positive and negative and the vast contrast in exposure. The many layers of this film, built up through permutations of imagery, mattes and masking, adds a depth and complexity to the superimposed loops. Gidal refers to the matte-positioning as "rhythmically structured"[70] but despite the systemic process, these changes appear randomised and fluid. The looped images are continuously moving across the frame both alternatively and simultaneously and appears to move an anti-clockwise direction. This is again a result of the

[69] Gaal-Holmes, *A History of 1970s Experimental Film*, 149.
[70] Film No.1, BFI Player, 2019.

material of the unsplit 8mm film and the use of mattes that creates the successive motion between the frames that are above and below each other. An element of chance exists within this work, further distancing the experimental process of the Co-op from the control of mainstream narrative film. The condition of the illusion becomes conscious by these chance moments and how the 8mm films and the frames work together. At times, only one images fills a quadrant, and as the motion fluctuates, three images enter the screen, creating the "pattern of rhythmic interchange."[71]

The perceptual challenge of trying to understand the structure or pattern of the film is made difficult through the opposing layers and the varying lengths of the loops. The viewers eye is not allowed to settle, the images themselves start to create a subtle flicker effect. Although there is the inclusion of more recognisable imagery, this representation still only appears as "mere hints of image"[72], the context removed by the interplay of superimpositions, image transformations and repetition. The emphasis on the analogue process redirects the importance of the iconic aspect to the indexical aspect. It is this link to indexicality and the potential displacement of any clear representation or narrative, that blurs the links between the material gestures and the viewers interpretation. The focus on the editing and printing stages dominates *Film No.1*, the experiments of the viewing experience becomes systematic of the reflexive nature of the film's production. The "post camera structuring"[73], evident in *Film No.1* (and in Leggett's *Shepherd's Bush*) shows the important links between each part of the shooting, processing and projecting stages.

[71] Le Grice*, Abstract Film and Beyond*, 136.

[72] Peter Gidal, "Film as Film" in *Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film Makers' Co-operative 1966-76,* 155. In this text Gidal also contradicts Holmes' description of the source of the imagery; "loops: a lamp shade reflected in the ripple of coffee in a cup; some cars and lights in very long shot at Piccadily at night."

[73] Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond*, 134.

The importance of the physicality of the film's material and the referential mode of production is at the focal point of *Film No.1*. When discussing production in *Structural Film Anthology*, Gidal states; "Each film is a record (not a representation, not a reproduction) of its own making"[74] and this is true of all the case studies selected in this chapter. For each stage of the filmmaking process, Gidal's Structural/Materialist ideals do provide a context for the original discussions of the Co-op works. The formal processes that are identified and applied to works like *Film No.1* do provide a basis to the work, but the strict formal processes that have often contextualised these theories have a danger of limiting the experience that these films have.

> "The term 'materialist'...has to be understood away from any simple reference to the physical materiality of film. 'Materialist' stresses process, a film in its process of production of images, sounds, times, meanings, the transformations effected on the basis of the specific properties of film in the relation of a viewing and listening situation. It is that situation, which is, finally, the point of 'structural/materialist film', its fundamental operation, the experience of film, and the experience of film.[75]

Stephen Heath's reflection of the term provides me with a basis in understanding the circling notion of materiality and process, and how the experience of *Film No.1* moves past just its surface transformations. These filmic devices ultimately act as a mask for representational imagery and by including different systems of reference, the "process of resting and negating existing constructions of meaning, a work determines new forms and resolves itself into new meaning."[76]

The final case study I have selected in this chapter is John Du Cane's *Lenseless* (1971). In *Lenseless*, the typical recording process is interrupted through the removal of the camera lens. The film stock is repeatedly moved past the camera at different speeds and directions, thus

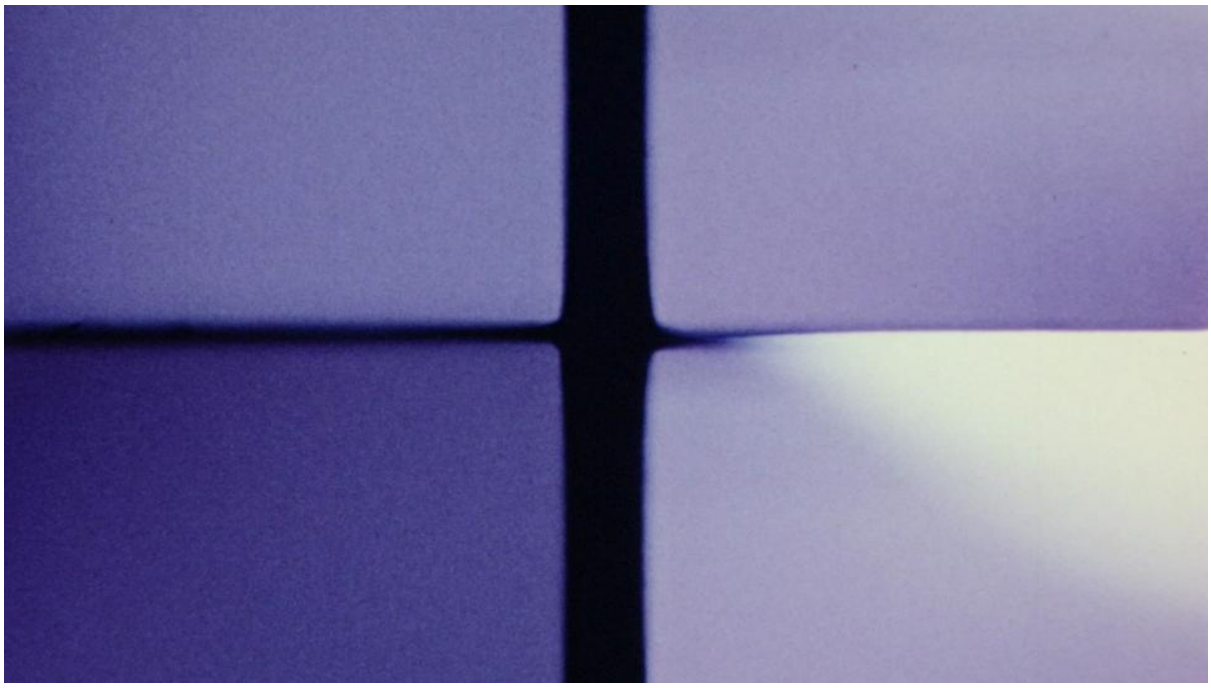
[74] Gidal, *Structural Film Anthology*, 2.
[75] Stephen Heath, "Repetition Time: Notes Around 'Structural/materialist Film'," in *British avant-garde film 1926-1995: an anthology of writings*, ed. Michael O'Pray (Bedfordshire: University of Luton Press, 1996), 174.
[76] Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in a Digital Age*, 58.

“broken into four separate images within one frame to produce a complex patterning of 'pure' light.”[77] The films structure is dependent on the light and how it lands and reacts on the emulsion of the film stock. Through the patterns of light, the abstract forms appear to be moving and changing both simultaneously and sequentially. The film is guided by the shifts and patterns from dark to light; at times these patterns appear to divide the frame vertically into two distinct parts and then back to four separate images. *Film No.1*, the technique of masking certain areas achieves a division within the frame, allowing for the changes in light exposure. The form and intense light patterns create a complex structure, whilst referring to the movement of the film through the printer and projector. The continual movement makes it difficult to interpret the structure of the film but the motion frame by frame is evident. Two successive frames appear to be moving in two opposing directions, perhaps negative and positive prints moving in parallel. The filmstrip would have been “transported past the camera gate at different speeds (in forward and reverse motion)”[78], this movement accentuated through the film being out of focus and the use of a vignette effect.

Subtle imperfections on the film flicker in at moments, whilst other abstract forms appear briefly in moments of deliberate application, such as a group of circular shapes that drop down the frame, and distorted existing film that appears to swing back and forward in the frame. These shots only filter in occasionally, any codes of narrativity disrupted. The indexical signification of the patterns of light and the hints towards the trace of the films production remains at its core. The metadata that has interrupted the film’s surface almost creates its own codes, the perforations draws focus on the physical qualities of the film itself. The initially unintended material gestures here create a link to the indexical sign and the signified. Whether a negative print of a hair or particle of grit caught in the projector, it shows that even after the

[77] Gidal, *Structural Film Anthology,* 137.
[78] Lenseless, BFI Player, 2019.

filming or printing process, the experience of the film can be altered. Du Cane described his process as "designed to create a very definite way of seeing, experiencing"[79] and through the complex exposure of light, this definite experience happens. *Lenseless* actively manipulates the level of awareness needed by the viewer, and through this manipulation of perceptual responses, the language of film is challenged.



John Du Cane, Lenseless, 1971.

John Du Cane was another Co-op member that was extremely active in the expanding critical development of experimental film. Du Cane contributed over 10 reviews for *Time Out* and other magazines between 1972-1974, and also focused directly on his own films as theoretical material. In *A Survey of the Avant-garde in Britain*, printed in Gallery House in 1972, Du Cane outlines the main intention of works like *Lenseless;*

> "My films explore dialectical relations between the viewer's cognitive systems and the systems established within the film. The effort to locate structures generates virtual transformations of the actual structure. The emphasis is toward establishing a self-reflective consciousness that is aware not only of film elements' manipulation of

[79] John Du Cane, "Statement on Watching My Films: A Letter from John Du Cane," quoted in Joy I.Payne, *Reel Rebels* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2015), 73.

> perceptual response but also of the effect this awareness has as a transforming agent of future response."[80]

The perceptual response and the cognitive impact are perhaps more immediate and intense within Sherwin and Le Grice's flicker effects. The stream of perceived movement from frame to frame is slower in Lenseless but the work does evoke a self-reflexive awareness of the transformations that are dictated by the film's techniques. The tensions between light, frame and grain all highlight the camera-less interventions and create a heightened consiousness towards the illusory reality of the abstract sequences. This intended manipulation of the viewer's understanding is also in part due to the difficulties in establishing 'film time' and 'real time'. *Lenseless* doesn't provoke a narrative through its audio or visuals but the moments of abstract forms and metadata do indicate towards a certain durational sequence. Du Cane himself notes that "one of the central facts about film is the fact of its transient duration"[81] and by considering this it poses the question of whether films like *Lenseless* can be completely void of any narrational reference to time passing.

By examine and revising these case films, it is evident to see how the dominant position of materiality defined not only the Co-op's work, but that of 1970's filmmaking. The narrow limits of the dominant cinema institution were at the centre of the questions being asked by the avant-garde. The social function of cinema is supported by its conditions of production and finance and the criticism of this structure of the film industry is shown through the Co-op work, and the format of the organisation itself. The main opposition was primarily to the "social effect transmitted through the psychological catharsis of its spectators / consumers."[82] By moving beyond the traditional cinematic illusions, the spectator becomes active and within each case

[80] John Du Cane, "A Survey of the Avant-garde" in *Structural Film Anthology*, 137.
[81] Gaal-Holmes, *A History of 1970s Experimental Film*, 143.
[82] Le Grice, *Experimental Cinema in a Digital Age*, 201.

study, the challenge towards the passive relationship with the viewer plays an important role. The attention on the expansion of these cinematic modes pulled away from the "seductive illusionism of mainstream cinema"[83] and towards a complete focus on the film's materiality and also towards an increasing versatality of screen formats. In the early 1970's, many of the LMFC artists became linked to the idea of expanded cinema, where experiments were pushed further with projections, multi-screen works and performative events. This continuing possibility of the film's experience, and the environments in which it could be exhibited, further stretched the opposition to the passivity and role of the cinematic spectator. Beyond the technicalities of the camera's image, the indexical systems of hand printing and live projections engaged both artist and audience into a new understanding of film. [85]

The added theoretical dominance of artists such as Le Grice and Gidal, has and continues to, direct the focus of this era of filmmaking. While I have stressed an emphasis on much of their writings to set the foundations of the Co-op work, this narrative has perhaps "overdetermined the importance of this type of LFMC activity at the expense of overshadowing more expressive, persona, visionary and diaristic forms of filmmaking in the decade." [86] The Structural/Materialist ideologies continued throughout second half of the 1970's but this position should not generalise or define the whole of the Co-op's movement. By placing the debates around "purely 'formal' concerns, the specificity of film is lost in terms of its engagement with problems of reproduction / representation and excludes the question of content."[87] Through the next two chapters I will focus on the shift away from the perceived

[83] Guy Sherwin, "Filmmakers' response to questions posed by the author" quoted in P Gaal-Holmes, "1970s Experimental Films: Then and Now, Sense of Cinema", March 2016.

[85] A.L Rees (*A History of Experimental Film and Video: from the canonical avant-garde to contemporary British practice*, 81) notes that the early concerns of these artists began to see film "as an investigation of its identity as a performance in which viewers as well as makers were engaged".

[86] Gaal-Holmes, *A History of 1970s Experimental Film*, 142.

[87] Michael Maziere, "Content in Context" *Undercut Reader*, 238.

influence of materiality and start to question the radical content of the Co-op artists, with an intent to consider how wider contexts started to openly inform and influence the reflexive process. The attention to materials was always somewhat displaced through hints of narrational or representation influence and it is possible to see how the different systems were challenged and ultimately the consequence for the viewer; "...the film viewer has essentially, been asked to re-assess their attitudes to and expectations of that experience as a representational system."[88]

[88] Mike Leggett, "London film makers co-op: guidelines for film-makers and renters" in *Other Cinemas : Politics, Culture and experimental film in 1970,* ed., Sue Clayton and Laura Mulvey (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 96.

Chapter 2: Beyond Materiality? 1968 - 1974

> "Certain signifiers cannot be radically undercut. The image of a pregnant woman, so the argument already went in 1969 around the Filmmakers Co-op, is locked into a signification system so ideologically overdetermined that no other kind of operation affecting the editing, zooming, focusing, camera work, subject position, in the audience, off-screen space, or sound, can "subvert" it. It remains culturally enclosed and politically solidified in meaning."
>
> Peter Gidal, Materialist Film, 1979.

The radicality of the Co-op's material experiments set their position at the forefront of the expanding avant-garde filmmaking. As outlined in the previous chapter, the opposal of traditional modes of representation and narrative became intrinsically linked to the focus on materials together with the printing and filmic processes explored by the Co-op. Despite the clear foundations that became set through both the circulation of practical and theoretical work, the divisive link between materiality and representation is undoubtedly less clear cut both in texts and films. At the same time as these dominant concepts were forming, the reflexive intentions also opened work up to influences from wider contexts. Within the material experiments, reconstructions of the referent began to mix with abstracted forms; "the aim was not just formal. By challenging the ways in which film representation appears, the viewer is made aware of the process by which the image is coded."[89] This observation from A.L Rees parallels previous discussions that follow on from the moments of reduced imagery explored in the Structural/Materialist films such as *Spot the Microdot* or *Film No.1*. This chapter will continue to explore key filmic devices such as rephotographing, repetition and loop printing, whilst looking at the crossover of techniques and forms within films of this period that show elements of social constructs, narratives and fall between abstraction and representation. The distinctive threads of these modes of filmmaking show a lack of convergence between the two,

[89] A.L Rees "Locating the LFMC: The First Decade in Context" LUX, 2016.

but the material and reflexive processes show elements that link and push the boundaries and language.

In *Deck* (1971) by Gill Eatherley, footage of a woman sitting on a bridge is rephotographed and transformed by permutations of colour and contrasts. Although the focal point is the film's material basis, the footage adds an element of representational reality for the viewer to decipher. Blurring between the abstract and representational forms, Peter Gidal's *Key* (1968) sees an iconic pop culture image of actor and model Nico zoomed to a point of abstraction. The deconstruction of the image is supported by the social culture to which it refers, and explores the materiality of both film and photography. *Shower Proof* (1968) by Fred Drummond also explores the connection between abstraction and representation. Drummond has created a scene set in a bathroom, showing the characteristics and interactions between two figures. The movements and identities are shown in a repetitive sequence but never become completely clear. As human forms began to enter into the experiments at the Co-op, so did visual representations of urban and natural landscapes.[90] *Angles of Incidence* (1973) by William Raban is based on a view through a window, the filming mirrored and doubled to create two images side by side. Through the unfolding footage of imagery, such as a view of a street, a narrative begins to form that appears to pass in 'real time'. Mike Leggett and Ian Breakwell's film *Sheet* (1970) takes another direction where the filmmakers have directly intervened in the landscape rather than entirely through the printing process. In different settings, a white sheet is shown, the representational reflexivity entering into a dialogue between the object, location and the filmmaker.

[90] A.L Rees (Locating the LFMC, 2016) notes that in 1975 "the critic Deke Dusinberre posited a distinct 'landscape tendency' in the British avant-garde, and he curated a series of screenings at the Tate to prove his point."

All of these works still escape traditional modes of dialogue and illusionism and the viewer and experience of the filmic material remain the focal point of processes. However, through looking at the mix between technique and context, it is possible to reinterpret these films (that are held within a strict material focus) and consider how representation and narratives have manifested themselves. Away from the rigid parameters of formal film, the exploration of representational reflexivity within the LFMC has perhaps been overlooked, and I can start to consider how the two reflexive modes of representation and materiality can be connected, and have been connected by these filmmakers.

Although Gidal's ideas presented in *Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist film* (1975) were closely associated with the 1970's Co-op work, the position entered into the avant-garde debate surrounding the deconstruction of the signifier in opposition to dominant cinematic ideologies. Peter Wollen's essay *The Two Avant-Gardes* (1975) created a theoretical distance from the set material focus, and instead presented an "alternative route between contentism and formalism"[91], where it would be "possible to work within the space opened up by the disjunction and dislocation of signifier and signified."[92] The two texts by Wollen and Gidal, both published in the same issue of *Studio International*, created the platform for the polemical discourse during this time. A later seminar held by the Co-op in 1976 saw this discourse evolve through papers from Wollen, Le Grice and Gidal in which the divide became more established; "Gidal and Le Grice cede ground to Wollen's insistence that illusionism and narrative, on the one hand, and abstraction and reflexive modernism, on the other hand, cannot be opposed absolutely."[93] The Structural/Materialist exploration can be characterised as

[91] Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes," Studio International (1975): 71
[92] Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes," Studio International, 1975: 72
[93] Noam M. Elcott, "Structural Integrity: Noam M. Elcott on Peter Gidal and the LFMC", Artforum, 2017: 84.

"constructing an empty signifier"[94] but perhaps through Wollen's avant-garde, the Co-op films can be explored through a different view on the signifier and signified and through meanings formed by even the slightest moments of representation. Erika Balsom further expands on Wollen's distance against the Co-op's perceived purist modernism; "this would mean not jettisoning content (the 'signified') entirely, but retaining it while insistently putting into question its relation to form (the 'signifier'). For Wollen, language and narrative were sites of intervention too important to be cast out of the purview of avant-garde filmmaking."[95]

At the earlier stages of the Co-operatives membership, the visibility of female filmmakers was somewhat shadowed by the dominance of practice by artists discussed in the first chapter. Amongst the strength of the male voices, Gill Eatherley, alongside Lis Rhodes and Annabel Nicholson, was one of the prominent female figures who began to emerge during this time. Echoing that of the Co-op's agenda, Eatherley's explorations focused on the materiality of film and the transformations possible through the filmic devices. In *Deck* (1971), footage captures the movements of a woman "sitting on a bridge"[96], traced to being shot "on a Standard 8, black and white, on a boat going from Sweden to Finland."[97] The original footage is three minutes long (the whole of *Deck* fourteen minutes) and the repeated film undergoes many transformations. First "refilmed on a screen where it was projectors at different speeds"[98], the content then goes through a series of changes through the optical printer. Coloured filters are added to the black and white film and the high levels of dark contrasts work to enhance the

[94] Michael O'Pray, "Modernism, Phantasy and Avant-Garde film", in *The Undercut Reader*, 34.
[95] Erika Balsom, "A 'New Face' at the Co-op", Tate Research Publication, 2015. https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/the-girl-chewing-gum-john-smith/a-new-face-at-the-co-op
[96] Deck, BFI Player, 2019.
[97] Mark Webber, "Interview with Gill Eatherley", Shoot Shoot Shoot Broadsheet, First edition, LUX: London, 2002.
[98] Gill Eatherley, "Light Cone Distribution Catalogue 1997", LUX Online, https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/gill_eatherley/deck.html

grainy quality of the film and further distance the footage from its original elements. The permutations of colour and the shifts from positive to negative are at play through the entirety of the film, bringing the attention towards certain forms, rather than the footage as a whole representation of a scene. Eatherley draws on other techniques that marks the possibilities of image transformations. The whole screen is reversed, flipped, mirrored and repeated. There appears to be no formal sequence or structures, instead guided by the artistic decision of the exploration of the visual aesthetic. The use of zooming and distorting the focus also starts to bring an abstracted element to the form of the scene. The structure of deck is built up by these changes and the format "alights from a re-filming, breaking down the screen size, pulse, shape, and transformation."[99]

Gill Eatherley, Deck, 1971.

[99] Gidal, *Materialist Film*, 117.

When viewing *Deck* through the BFI Player, the experimental layers of viewing are exposed; the online copy of the film traces the rephotographed footage, the projected image and the digital version, indicating the varying modes of reception for different audiences. Before the film settles on the footage as an entire scene, the start of the work is dictated by the way Eatherley exploits the movement of the film running through the various projectors, the manipulation of speed bringing a new dynamic to the duration of the footage. *Deck* is a single screen work, but the digital viewing competes with the projections, showing the different stages of recording at play from the initial footage, to the refilming of the projector screens. The movement of the film in the frame and the changes in screen size keeps bringing the awareness back to the mode of production and viewing. The involvement of projectors in Eatherley's experiments mark the link to expanded cinema and the way the connection between the filmmaking and the viewer were being tested. During the same time that *Deck* was produced, Eatherley became associated with the extended work of Filmaktion, alongside Raban, Nicholson and Le Grice. Their practice came to further challenge the reception of film, focusing on live performance and the projected event as the primary reality of filmmaking. Rather than dictating another label for a filmmaking group, Filmaktion defined the presentation of works and the shows that the artists came to exhibit together.[100] The artists were still active as a core part of the Co-op, but through an extension of the Co-op's space, this group defined a particular mode of filmmaking that provoked a new kind of experience for the audience:

> "the unconventional layout of these alternative spaces reconfigured the relationship between viewer and film image to introduce a reinvigorated form of spectatorial proximity, which extended countercultural ideas of the politically activated body of the individual to encompass the notion of an activated form of perception."[101]

[100] As Annabel Nicolson comments the name Filmaktion, was a "way of formalising, giving a name to something that was already happening" *(Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative 1966 – 1976, 158).*

[101] Lucy Reynolds, "Non-institution": Finding Expanded Cinema in the Terrains Vagues of 1960s London", LUX, 2017. https://lux.org.uk/writing/terrain-vague-lucy-reynolds

The possibilities that various formats of projections allowed started to negate the strong shift against the viewing experience that defined traditional cinema. Although *Deck* is in a single screen format, it still prompts a similar effect in the connection between the viewer and the work;

> "Whether you are dealing with a single postcard size screen or six ten-foot screens, the problems are basically the same - to try to establish a more positively dialectical relationship with the audience. I am concerned (like many others) with this balance between the audience and the film - and the noetic problem involved."[102]

Eatherley's statement in *Structural Film Anthology*, strongly places *Deck* under the scope of Structural/Materialist ideas, but perhaps this critical understanding can be displaced by the hints of narrative and representation.[103] When watching the film, it is difficult to separate the footage from the printing and projection stages but the focus on the unknown woman in the scene remains throughout. Although there are no distinct narrational cues to indicate where the footage is from, the representational content does hint towards a sense of journey and the movement gives the viewer something to interpret amongst the filmic processes. The subtly of the movements of the woman's hair is repeated and the repetition starts to move the content towards the iconic sign. The actions and features of the woman continue to shift, sometimes only partly on screen, meaning the rest of the environment and objects around her come to the forefront.

In experimental film, representations are "tenuous, obscure and always on the verge of being uncontrollable"[104] but no matter the obscurity, the representations are still there. If the

[102] Gill Eatherley, "Notes on Film, London Avant-Garde Film Festival Catalogue 1973", in *Structural Film Anthology,* 120.

[103] This also translates into Eatherley's Light Occupations series (1973-1974) shown on the BFI Player that employs elements of representation as Eatherley "performs simple investigations of the filmic equipment, particularly the camera and the projecter."

[104] Michael O'Pray, "Modernism, Phantasy and Avant-garde film", in *Undercut Reader,* 34.

perceptual and structured sequences in *Cycles #1* (1972) by Sherwin are compared to *Deck*, the fundamental nature of materiality still features, but the attention different; *Cycles #1* draws on nothing but the physicality of the material, whilst *Deck* is based on how representation can appear through the filmmaking devices. The use of representational imagery in *Deck* produces "a fractured subjectivity in constant conflict with social meaning(s)" [105] and rather than becoming completely devoid of any content, the work becomes underlined with a narrative that is deciphered through the material processes.

Peter Gidal's *Key* (1968) uses a still image rather than moving footage to form the basis of the work. The two main techniques used on the photograph are zooming and defocusing, achieved through the camera recording. The film starts at the highest point of abstraction, zoomed in closely to an unknown source. The grain of the surface has a painterly quality, the light and dark contrasts forming abstract shapes, the image appearing to grow as a response to the exposure to the light. Over the films' duration, the camera slowly zooms out and lighter parts dominate the screen. It is only around three minutes that "the image becomes identifiable as the face of an anonymous woman"[107], the camera slowly centralising the whole features. When the features become more apparent, the dark contrasts continue, the right hand side of the face darker and the shadow of the hand to the face accentuating the forms. The image never "reaches full clarity" [108] and at six and a half minutes, the film takes another stylistic direction. Defocusing the camera lens, the image starts to blur and gradually blurs beyond any recognition. The forms eventually reduce to two blocks of contrasts before completely fading out to black.

[105] Gidal, *Materialist Film*, 117.
[107] Siona Wilson, *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 2015), 138.
[108] Wilson, *Art Labor, Sex Politics*, 138.

Through the films entirety the image comes into focus, and out again. This technique used directly through the camera creates the films simple structure. The surface quality and composition of *Key*, hints towards Gidal's modernism that A.L Rees clarifies as "paring down and minimalizing the image, so that each frame resists the lure of unity and possession. His films are a running critique of their own viewing conditions, and internalise their pictorial codes."[109] The slow progression of the change in focus, first minimalises and then builds the image. These changes go on to highlight the material qualities possible through film, photography, and the combination when the two function together. The whole of the film is aimed at "addressing the materiality of the photographic image"[110], the photochemical process and physical qualities identified before the content of the image. The Bazinian idea of photographic realism, and the mechanical mediation of the camera, is challenged by Gidal's anti-realist ideology but the illusion of representation is complicated by the filming of the photograph "hence producing a representation of representation."[111] Through the trace of recording a photograph, the representational separation that Gidal identifies in *Structural Film Anthology* is also challenged. His statement, "...Each film is a record (not a representation, not a reproduction) of its own making"[112] becomes slightly fragmented when watching *Key*. The reflexive stages of shooting and techniques are made evident, whilst the film also separately deals with the representation of the photographic image. Although the representation is disrupted through Gidal's technical decisions, the representational reality cannot be avoided.

The devices that have constructed the film, "stages a tension between the referential capacity of the image and the disinterested formal properties of the film"[113] and it is this tension that

[109] A.L Rees, "Locating the LFMC: The First Decade in Context", LUX, 2016.
[110] Key, BFI Player, 2019.
[111] Michael O'Pray, *Avant-garde Film: Forms, Themes and Passions* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 98.
[112] Gidal, *Structural Film Anthology*, 2.
[113] Wilson, *Art Labor, Sex Politics*, 139.

pulls *Key* between both abstraction and representation. The film never falls completely into abstraction, or into complete representation. The challenge to the photographic and filmic codes are balanced by the challenges to the social assumptions that the image represents. Wider cultural references in *Key* hint at the potential distance from the formalist ideas. The photograph in *Key*, depicts 1960's pop art icon Nico. Although there is nothing to formally identify the face of the woman, the image during the sixties might have been recognisable to audiences familiar with popular and underground culture. The spectator's ability to reconstruct the image is based not only on the aesthetic of the forms, but the cultural reference of Nico herself.

Peter Gidal, Key, 1968.

The experience of the image is changed through the sign of Nico, whilst the aesthetic of the film is balanced by the sound. As with the photograph, the accompanying sound holds societal or cultural references. The soundtrack is "Bob Dylan's song Sad-Eyes Lady of the Lowlands

in reverse"[115] and despite the association not obvious, there are perhaps elements of the song that a viewer could recognise or pick out. With both the visual and audio deconstructing codes, the film directly points to the intervention of Gidal's techniques, as well as the way different medias contrast and challenge the image and music. The constant redirections in *Key* do align with the Structural/Materialist ideologies of minimising content and deconstructing narrative, but despite Gidal's theoretical viewpoint, *Key* could be considered through Wollen's lens of the avant-garde film retaining the signified and questioning the signifier. *Key* moves beyond the photographs indexical sign, and the filmic material gestures and towards icon and symbolic signs of the image and audio. Through the redirections of the signs, "the viewer is dissuaded from being seduced by the represented content of a particular moment, the temptation to assign narrative significance or the desire to identify an overriding formal structure."[116]

In the same year as *Key*, Fred Drummond's *Shower Proof* (1968) is another example of a film made at the height of the Co-op's material agenda that reflected a materiality conflicted by narrative tendencies and referential imagery. *Shower Proof* depicts a scene of two people in a bathroom and the sequence of movements that are repeated; "he brushing his teeth, she tying up her hair, stepping into the shower and stepping out drying herself, then the man again brushing his teeth and so on."[117] As the actions of the figures are repeated, the film undergoes two main printing transformations of high contrasts and negative prints. As a result of using Lith film, there are initially no gradations of grey, the increased contrasts creating the graphic like abstract forms. The viewer is immediately drawn to the movement of new forms that appear to move in front and merge with the background forms. Through the movements, the shapes and features become recognisable, even though these features are still only suggestions or outlines of forms. The high contrasts result in an almost painterly or grainy quality which

[115] Wilson, *Art Labor, Sex Politics*, 139.
[116] Ian Garwood, *The Sense of Film Narration* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 83.
[117] Verina Glaessner, "Cinema Rising", in *Structural Film Anthology*, 133.

draws the scene away from its original recording.[118] As the film progresses, the contrasts decrease to form a scale of monochromatic tones; in this moment a more defined image appears before the heightened contrast reduce the scene back to minimalist forms. When the contrast reappears, the pixilation becomes even stronger and the imagery is pulled back to its surface quality.

The printing techniques completely alter the content of the film, the recopying and reprinting "exploits the degeneration of the image"[119] and confronts the links between the forms. As the image is deconstructed and reconstructed, it becomes apparent that the film is a series of sequences or perhaps several moments of footage cut and spliced together. Although there are elements of repeated movements, compared to works such as *Crosswaite's Film No.1* (1971), the structure of *Shower Proof* feels more consistent with the freedom of one continuous shot. In his original draft notes on the film, Drummond approaches the issue of how to construct reality rather than a systematically reconstructed work; "...contrived realism is not a true record of spontaneous actuality – this could never be? enough to contrive (the camera makes every situation an arrangement), then edit out as much obvious contrivance."[120]

It is the filmic processes of *Shower Proof* that brings the work from abstraction to representation and back again; "the image grows from the abstract, yet plainly anthropomorphic, steadily through to the personal yet non-specific – we see neither the man's nor the woman's face in detail - and back."[121] The transition from the abstracted to the personal

[118] This grainy quality becomes pixelated when watching the film on the BFI Player; the digital copy cannot render the film, changing the quality and the way in which I have viewed, and experienced the film.

[119] Mark Webber, "Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film-maker's Co-operative & British Avant-garde film 1966 – 1976" Programme Notes, 2002.

[120] Mark Webber, "Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film-maker's Co-operative & British Avant-garde film 1966 – 1976" Programme Notes, 2002.

[121] Verina Glaessner, "Cinema Rising" in *Structural Film Anthology*, 133.

starts to ask questions regarding the characteristics of the anonymous individuals, and the wider context of identity. The viewer is forced to consider the interaction and relationship between the two people and speculate on whether the scene is staged or a natural domestic interaction. The male and female are constantly explored by the camera, the recording moving from a fixed viewpoint to becoming directly involved in the space. There is an intimacy to the filming and the filmmaker's interaction, but the printed transformations also create a barrier between the viewer and the two individuals.

Fred Drummond, Showerproof, 1968

The use of anthropomorphic forms starts to defy the structure of some structural films. The Undercut Reader features "A Dialogue", a conversation between Stuart Hood and Noel Burch in which they discuss independent cinema and the ideological concerns that came from it;

> "The radical anti-humanist, anti-anthropomorphic gesture was regarded in itself a fundamental gesture. But it was a gesture which had taken account of the fact that our social experience of sounds and images is not that, and this was therefore a cinema which refused to even recognise the primacy of the general experience of sounds and images as communications and as language.[122]

[122] Stuart Hood and Noel Burch "A Dialogue" in *Undercut Reader*, 188.

In contrast to the ideas discussed by Hood and Burch, *Shower Proof* does not completely defy the anti-humanist gesture. The imagery engages with the individual experience of each movement in a way that communicates and confronts the exact primacy that is typically opposed in experimental film. Despite there being no dialogue or traditional narrative indicators, the conditions of a narrative structure start to form and signify a distance from the sole intention of material gestures. The movements push the aim of the film towards representational reflexivity and the viewer is invited to experience the reflexive process of the filmmaker's interception of the scene. The language of the film is disrupted through the printing processes, but the language is still confronted. The intervention by Drummond, and the iconic reference still allows for more symbolic questions around the signifier to be asked. The attention of the camera at times is more on the woman than the man, and the identity of the women is made clearer when the profile of her face is shown in greater detail. The signification of the imagery also becomes more loaded with a social context when the women's naked body is shown. Shots of the man's body are less problematic with ideas of representation than the close up's of the women's body may trigger. This intimacy of the human forms communicates with the viewer, creating a narrative that is not only showing the scene, but that is creating complications of the gaze, voyeurism and the representation of the body. *Shower Proof*, and the early introduction of the body shows how even at the start of materiality and abstraction, that the questions being asked by the Co-op could enter all of these films into new debates.

The inclusion of human forms within the Co-op work was also joined by natural elements of the landscape becoming an influential source. Again, the attention on materiality was still prominent but the referential imagery has strong connections to the representational. William

Raban's *Angles of Incidence (1973)* is a two-screen work that explores the landscape through the view of a window. Three different landscapes present themselves from the small viewpoint, the double imagery running side by side. Dark contrasts on the screen show the mode in which the viewer is watching, the two pieces of footage running simultaneously, the whole footage never filling the screen. The settings shift from the subtle movements of trees to people walking past on a street. Buildings, people and the natural elements become the representational material that Raban shoots. The filming was achieved through the "axis of camera rotation and the shifting minor changes in viewpoint were explored by attaching a rope between a camera (fixed to a tripod) and a central point in a large window."[123] The camera is always aimed out of the window, the focus eventually drawing back to the action of recording. As the screens alter and flicker, the viewer is able to see the effect of the changes on the camera. In the film, the footage goes through a sequence of changes; layering, camera tilts, different speeds, reversal, images alternating, and this is all constructed through the formality of Raban's work and the precise action of the filming equipment.

[123] Patti Gaal-Holmes*, 1970s Experimental Films: Then and Now,* Sense of Cinema, 2016.

William Raban, Angles of Incidence, 1973.

Angles of Incidence relies completely on the editing possibilities of the camera, rather than the printing processes; "the film is presented un-edited just as it was filmed in the camera. The patterns of camera movement are not the product of a pre-given shooting script, but rather they evolved actually at the time of filming."[124] This type of editing always provokes the idea of time passing, which feeds in to Raban's intention of not necessarily approaching the materiality of film, but rather the "materiality of time."[125] The footage in *Angles of Incidence* plays in real time but when the snaps of footage are sped up or reversed, time is altered, constructing "a sense of fragmentary time.'[126] Time and filmic duration is explored in both the practical and theoretical work of the LFMC, and Raban's work stretches the tensions between real and film time. The way Raban deliberately uses the camera positions feeds into the progression of works that are "directly referential to the camera and its functioning."[127] In *Abstract Film and Beyond*,

[124] Angles Of Incidence (double screen version), LUX, https://lux.org.uk/work/angles-of-incidence-double-screen-version

[125] William Raban, "Materiality of Time" (University of the Arts London, 2015), 15.

[126] Gaal-Holmes, "1970s Experimental Films: Then and Now," Sense of Cinema, 2016.

[127] Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond*, 125.

Malcolm Le Grice identifies Raban's work within the development around the mid 70's that "can be seen as part of a general tendency towards a conceptual approach to the processes of filming and projection."[128]

Michael O'Pray, in his essay "William Raban's landscape films: the formalist imagination", has written extensively about Raban's work, noting his films "never simply the observation of these phenomena, but the working over of that subject matter by means of the filmic apparatus itself."[129] The structure of *Angles of Incidence* traces the formal concerns of the camera techniques but the conceptual triggers are invited by the visual cues of the environment, no matter how reduced the representational content becomes. The viewer is conscious of the repeated angles of the recording but whilst searching for the similarities between the two sides of imagery unfolding, this invites both a contemplative and active role from the audience. The imagery in the film starts to resist the indexical signification, and the physical trace of the camera work becomes redirected.

Even through the imagery in *Angles of Incidence*, O'Pray still states the minimal impact of the representation; "the work is "rated as a classic of the landscape genre although in many ways it seems that landscape is rather marginal to it, both as representation and as formal concern."[131] Although I would put more emphasis on the landscape's impact, indexicality is still important and through this, wider modernist references can be found. In a 1993 text, Raban states the film is "the starting point of a continuous investigation into ways of presenting cubist space in terms

[128] Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond,* 126.

[129] Michael O'Pray, "William Raban's landscape films: the formalist imagination," in *Undercut Reader*, 111.

[131] Michael O'Pray, "William Raban's landscape films: the formalist imagination," in *Undercut Reader*, 109

of the flat surface of the film screen."[132] The depth of the landscape is flattened by the screen in which recorded, and the projection in which it is viewed. The multiple critical contexts in which *Angles of Incidence* operates makes it a radical piece of work that holds links to the material experiments that the Co-op are most associated. Representation may still just be a platform in which material reflexivity could form, but this film plays an important role in the midst of changes to the avant-garde. As well as the expansive experiments of viewing and exhibiting that came with expanded cinema, the landscape genre (that Raban's film became labelled under) reintroduced the reflexive tensions between content and shape; "after almost a decade of process-led films, the image was back."[133]

Ian Breakwell and Mike Leggett's *Sheet* (1970) further tests the way the landscape is depicted through film, and the filmmakers manipulation. Centered on the relationship between camera, object and location, "a white linen sheet is filmed in a series of locations as a focal point."[134] The repeated placement of sheet forms a set of sequences that is built from 11 locations explored by the artists, from The Paris Metro, to the courtyard and rooftops around the Barbican, London.[135] Through the various locations, the three metre sheet changes in placement and depth on the screen, the viewer always searching for where the sheet will next appear. The scenes almost become a fragmented montage, the various movements and difference in settings hold a continuity through the repeated use of the object. The film is recorded and printed in black and white, enhancing the whiteness and size of the sheet against the representational footage. It is this deliberate decision to film on a monochromatic scale that makes the sculptural elements of the spaces very different to if it was projected in colour.

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[132] Angles Of Incidence (double screen version), LUX, https://lux.org.uk/work/angles-of-incidence-double-screen-version

[133] A.L Rees, "Locating the LFMC: The First Decade in Context", LUX, 2016.

[134] Sheet, BFI Player, 2019.

[135] Mike Leggett, Notes concerning Sheet, 1970. http://www.mikeleggett.com.au/sites/default/files/BFVASCIMG_0115.JPG, Legget's notes also list all of the location including both artists' flats.

The places are not formally identified in the film but the scenes show familiar environments of "rural and urban locations"[136] and the representational reality of each location shows the elements of the landscape, buildings and the people that the filming interacts with. As the sheet moves, the locations alter and this constant interaction is pushed by the representational reflexivity, rather than any abstracted forms constructed through physical material exploration. The shooting of the film is not masked by techniques, but instead shows the repetition of the playful events that follows the artists actions. *Sheet* has a performative element even though the artists never appear in the footage. In his notes on the film, Leggett describes Breakwell's 19 proposals for the film, through "an event lasting one year from May 1969."[137] Each proposal invites an act that involves the sheet, although no specific location is mentioned. The 8th proposal reads "Place the sheet in a narrow street"[138] and the instructions follow the pattern of small actions that involve the object and the surrounding environment. Each placement and technique is considered and planned, and the activity of the filmmakers intervenes with the experience of the work.

Artists at the Co-op often worked in collaboration, whether this was for recording or printing and production.[139] *Sheet* exposes not only the interaction between the sheet and the locations, but the interactions between the two artists. The two observe their own collaborative

[136] Sheet, LUX Online, https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/ian_breakwell/sheet.html
[137] Mike Leggett, "Notes concerning Sheet," 1970.
[138] Mike Leggett, "Notes concerning Sheet," 1970.
[139] Peter Gidal (Materialist Film, 1989, 146) expands on the collaborative essence of the Co-op's dynamic; "Each film was usually the main work of one filmmaker, but the collective work that went into making that film was always acknowledged in day to day practice as a basis for the process of filmmaking in the first place. That is why, for example, many films made at the London Filmmakers Co-op were printed by or with the help of others than those who shot them; that is why shared information as to grading on the printer, purchasing stock from cheap sources (East German Orwo, for example), testing out effects with a group of five or six filmmakers and discussing these effects whilst still in production, and so on, was commonplace."

construction through processes of composing the Sheet's placement, the way in which this is recorded and the camera techniques that frame the object and film as a whole.[140]

The way the film is composed with the separate pieces of footage extends the impact of the filmmakers' decision. Beyond the recording techniques used at the different sites, the structure of the film, and length of each footage is decided in the workshop. It is this composition that Co-op artist Roger Hammond identifies as forming a "somewhat soft mesmeric movie, the repetitions and symmetries setting up moods in which one became immersed."[141] The repeated format of the sheet highlights the continual shifts of the sheet's location. At times, the sheet itself begins to serve as an abstract shape that displaces the perceived reality of the scenes, and other times acts as a prop or sculpture, assuming "eerie, anthropomorphic qualities as it changes shape."[142]

Ian Breakwell and Mike Leggett, Sheet, 1970.

[140] Mike Leggett, "Notes concerning Sheet," 1970.

[141] Roger Hammond, "London Film-Makers' Co-operative catalogue supplement, 1972" in Mark Webber, "Shoot Shoot Shoot: The First Decade of the London Film-maker's Co-operative & British Avant-garde film 1966 – 1976" Programme Notes, 2002.

[142] Joy I Payne, *Reel Rebels*, 96

As the viewer watches these changes, the conceptual implications of the sheet is central to the film's narrative. Beyond the conscious understanding of textures and shape, it is unclear whether the cloth is inhabited by the human body or whether its form responds to the architectural spaces in which it is laid. The placement of the sheet is directed by the actions of Leggett and Breakwell, but the minimalist shape of the sheet appears to drift through the transitions of the scenes. The viewer has no option but to reinterpret the meaning of the sheet and the space around it. There are moments where the buildings become barriers between the camera and the sheet, but also a platform for the artists to elevate the form. Asides from an architectural or sculptural focus, human presence is shown throughout the film which immediately starts to involve wider social implications. The way in which scenes are cropped draws attention to both individual and crowds of people, reflecting different moments in society. Although this expansion of context is not explicitly implied, the sheet becomes a conceptual as well as a physical motif; perhaps the sheet could be viewed as a symbol of homelessness, or isolation in society, or merely a reflection to highlight the scale of the different spaces around us. Through the simple recording of the sheet, Breakwell and Leggett have created a film where the formal understanding of filmic devices become mixed with observational footage and an altered conceptual reality.

Through these case studies, the transitions between abstraction and representation are constantly at work within the Co-op films. Whilst the experimental forms and the printing transformations are still at play, the representational and narrational hints offer a challenge to the formal approaches.[143] From these formal approaches – the physicality of the filmstrip in *Spot the Microdot* – to the representation hints – the anthropomorphic forms in *Shower Proof*

[143] It is important to note here, the parallel nature of these two trends, representation and abstraction and the intermediary nature of the films being created at this time.

– the themes of illusion, time, structure and the relationship with the viewer are still being confronted. The representation and abstracted reflexivity shows the different ways in which narrational structures and anti-illusionism can be experienced. The interplay between these two modes of filmmaking enters into a critical dialogue that, as asked by Le Grice, questions "whether any aspect of illusion or sequential (narrational) structure can be made compatible with the anti-illusionist material aesthetic."[144] Through this period of the Co-op works, the two show signs of existing together, with Noam M. Elcott drawing on the shift to narrative as the decade progressed; "Le Grice's query was largely answered in the late 1970's and 80's, as the LFMC and other experimental film groups turn to narrative."[145]

The materiality of the work produced at the Co-op defined, and continues to, the history of their films. Even though the transition towards narrative structures is attributed to the end of the decade, Patti Gaal-Holmes makes a key challenge to this history;

> "Accounts such as these, mistakenly arguing that a "'return to image' occurred at the end of the 1970s, have informed the dominant reading of 1970s experimental film history. The 'return to image' thesis will therefore be challenged to argue that there was no return at the end of the decade but that personal, more representational, forms of filmmaking existed throughout the decade."[146]

The dominance of the anti-narrative and abstract films continued to construct the Co-op's intentions in the seventies, through work on the perceptual reality of film and the demystification of conventional narratives. This is directly recorded in the historical reflections of the 1970's avant-garde (most notably defined by the retrospective application of the Structural/Materialist ideologies in the mid seventies) but contemporary publications like Gaal-Holmes' supports a shift in readjusting this focused history. The existence of representational

[144] Noam M. Elcott, "Structural Integrity: Noam M. Elcott on Peter Gidal and the LFMC", Artforum, 2017.

[145] Noam M. Elcott, "Structural Integrity: Noam M. Elcott on Peter Gidal and the LFMC", 2017.

[146] Patti Gaal-Holmes, "Decade of diversity: A History of 1970s British Experimental Film", PhD diss,(University of Portsmouth, 2013).

forms in the work of the Co-op are evident in the five case studies in this chapter – these films are just a snapshot of examples in the crossovers in technique, and the tensions between abstract and representational forms during 1968 and 1974.[147] The Co-op's work continued to evolve and became much more than just personal agendas from 1974. The hints of representation drew on overtly political contexts and social intentions, which again, became manifested through representational reflexivity. From the political efficacy towards dominant cinema ideologies, to openly social and political questions, the changing climates during the 1970's and shift in the Co-op's work has been increasingly supported by emerging research surrounding feminist theories. The "shortcomings of structural and material experimentation"[148] allowed for new narratives to take the place of formal abstract film. Artists continued to stretch the possibilities of filmmaking and began to outwardly question narratives surrounding women and approached social and political issues of sexuality and gender. The experiments in form continued but the technical experimentation became displaced by wider contexts explored through representational reflexivity.

[147] With Gaal-Holmes' observation in mind, the timeline of this thesis does however begin to lean towards the middle and end of the decade to sight the changes in experiments.

[148] Patti Gaal-Holmes, "Decade of diversity: A History of 1970s British Experimental Film", PhD diss.,(University of Portsmouth, 2013).

Chapter 3: Experiments in Representational Reflexivity 1974-1979

"From a feminist perspective, abstraction is dependent on a primary exclusion of the social – within the Modernist aesthetic of Abstract Formalism, issues such as the social construction of gender in film simply cannot appear."

Esther Sonnet, The Politics of Representation: Modernism, Feminism, Postmodernism, 1993

The expanding practices of the London Film-Makers were continually stretching the possibilities of filmmaking. The Co-op had a direct impact in the modes of filmmaking that employed representation and narrative to instigate wider social and political constructs, and these practices were at the centre of the avant-garde debates surrounding materiality. Experiments with layers of reworked film, repetition and permutations of colour continued to explore the formal possibilities of the filmstock, but this material approach became aligned with evolving contexts and personal modes of filmmaking. The mid-seventies also marked a growing force of emerging feminist theories and the development of gender and political aesthetics. From gestures of the body, and its relationship to the camera, to representational scenes of a self-reflexive nature, the feminist conditions created by women filmmakers directly impacted the work being produced at the Co-op. Through these expansions of performative and reflexive modes, the LFMC members were outwardly questioning the narratives that surrounded women, women filmmakers and confronting the politics of representation.

The movements and organisations of women groups were key in highlighting the isolation of women artists, and pushing back against the lack of support for female practitioners and exhibition opportunities. The very model of the Co-op offered a mutually supportive scene

"outside the auspices of a feminist collectivism"[149] but the conditions of this wider feminist advocacy impacted the Co-op narrative. The examinations of gender roles and questions of identity are evident in the work of Jayne Parker and Jeanette Iljon and go far beyond the formal boundaries of materiality. The implicit reflections on gender connotations highlight an overwhelming study of outwardly socio-political contexts and an understanding of the changing position of film practices and feminist theory which instigates a "wider explosive meeting between feminism and patriarchal culture."[150]

The case studies that I have selected span from 1974 – 1979 and sit within a context that marked a further dislocation of the debates on the 1970's avant-garde. Wollen's *The Two Avant-Garde's* (1975), although heavily focused on the distinct split between the two avant-garde strategies, suggested a third mode that could be found through gaps between commercial filmmaking and the Structural/Materialist movement. [151] These expanded forms continued to oppose cinemas ideological themes and propaganda but also began to distance from the strict formal concerns outlined through the Structural/Materialist principles. The formal concerns masked the issues of signification, whilst the representational experiments focused on different ways the signifier and the signified work to further question the context of an image in film, and how the film was perceived by the viewer. The films discussed in this chapter show the shifting social tensions and the filmic impulses that stretched form and content, where abstraction became "jostled aside by competing interests, in which issues relating to sexuality, gender and cultural iconography began to take centre stage."[152]

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[149] Lucy Reynolds, "Circulations and Co-operations: Art, Feminism and film in 1960's and 1970's London", 145.

[150] Laura Mulvey, "Film Feminism and the Avant-Garde", 209.

[151] David Rodowick (Politics, Theory and the Avant-Garde" in *Undercut Reader*, 36) observes how it is this third movement of this avant-garde that has "exhibited the most growth" since Wollen's essay, specifically through films exploring feminist issues and narrative forms.

[152] Michael O'Pray, "Moving On: British Avant-Garde Film in the Late 70's and Early 80's", LUX, 2017.

The emergence of feminist film criticism challenged the existing strategies of filmmaking and further expanded the language of the Co-op films beyond the parameters of formal abstract film. *Focii* by Jeanette Ijon (1974) shows the solo performance of a dancer, moving around a space surrounded by mirrors. The film is constructed through the dancer's movements, the representational footage highlighting issues such as identification in cinema and the relationship to self, body and the camera. *Free Show* (1979) by Jayne Parker is filmed in three scenes, each depicting a domestic act performed by a woman. The narrative of the performed scenes is constructed through quick shots and no dialogue, that force the viewer to confront the potentially violent and uncomfortable scenes as they unfold. *Guérillière Talks* (1978) by Vivienne Dick captures eight different women linked to the 1970s punk music scene. Each roll of footage marks not only the material process, but considers the social context which surrounds each of the artists and musicians. Susan Stein's *G* (1979) forms a direct relationship between the language of the camera and the language of the film. A strong female voice is heard amongst the experimental nature of images and sounds, representation and abstraction existing together to provoke questions of the language used by women writers. Anne Rees-Mogg's *Sentimental Journey* (1977) is split into two parts and focuses on two themes; the first on the approaches to filmmaking and then second a debate on social housing and planning. The documentary style is balanced by the exploration of filmic devices, a distinct example of how formal devices mixed with openly representational footage and wider social commentary.

The growing voice of women filmmakers, through films such as these, came at a time when the social impact of feminist theories was beginning to shift not only the balance of the Co-op, but the entire structure of the avant-garde. The theoretical stance of Lis Rhode's text *Whose History* (1979) was a direct challenge to the *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910 -*

1975 exhibition, and the subsequent withdrawal of many female artists from the exhibition has become inseparable when considering the conflicting dynamics of experimental film. Whilst the exhibition intended to reflect the filmic landscape of avant-garde cinema – and contexts surrounding formal or Structural/Materialist film – it soon entered into a new debate; "what was blindingly apparent was the lack of women both represented in, and involved with the selection and structuring of, the exhibition."[153] A number of the Co-op members, Rhodes, Nicolson, Stein and Iljon, responded to the particular history that was presented in the exhibition. The intervention came to the gender imbalance and following this resistance, the catalogue of the exhibition included Rhode's texts and other essays under 'Women and Formal Film' that responded by "challenging the didactic and closed nature of those artists and filmmakers selected to present work, the group asserted an objection to the lack of institutional engagement with feminist film practice."[154] The significance of this challenge to the issue of visibility and representation of, and by women, shows the climate in which female filmmakers were making work, and how the response to this marginalisation manifested through practical and theoretical confrontations. It is also Lis Rhode's film *Light Reading* (1978) that is often considered as the historic moment in redefining the filmic impulses;

> "...its formal assurity was expressive perhaps for the first time in the British avant-garde of an interiority, provided by a first-person voice-over which immediately placed it in a narrative aesthetic. The film's combination of enigmatic image and voice was ground-breaking and reflected the 'personal-is-political' clarion-call of the burgeoning feminist movement."[155]

Whilst this complex mix of narrative, representation and formal film accumulated strongly through a feminist lens, representation reflexivity can be viewed separately and as part of the development towards a specific critical gender awareness. Jeanette Iljon's *Focii* (1974) came

[153] Lis Rhodes, "Whose History" in *Film As Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910-1975*, Exhibition Catalogue, Arts Council of Great Britain (1979), 119.

[154] Lisa La Feuvre, "Lis Rhodes", LUX Online, 2015. https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/lis_rhodes/essay(1).html

[155] Michael O'Pray, "Moving On: British Avant-Garde Film in the Late 70's and Early 80's", LUX, 2017.

four years before Rhode's *Light Reading* and although the feminist angle exists through Iljon's performative exploration of the gaze, Focii's importance is held within its reflexive techniques. The film follows a female dancer's movements around a studio, the movements reflected in a "fractured wall of mirrors."[156] The conditions of the sparse dark space sets the intensity of the performative stage and the narrative is constructed around the dancer's actions, the tension in the way she closely watches her own movements in the reflection. The dark contrasts between the white outfit of the dancer and the room she is in, accentuate the movements and highlight the forms of the body as she moves in and out of the shadows. The footage has a slight purple hue that highlights the quality of the filmic grain, and moments of other colour lenses are used which again emphasis the contrasts and movements.[157] Throughout the performance, the camera changes focus on the dancer, from her full body to close angle shots and these transitions become disrupted as moments of external footage interject. It is the properties of the shooting and framing technique that intensify the viewing experience, along with the building narrative that unfolds as the film progresses. The dancer appears to follow no sequence and poses the question of whether these are planned choreographed movements by the filmmaker, or the freedom of the dancers own personal expression.

As the movement builds, the dancer starts to challenge the reflection she is seeing. Rapid movements of the dancer appear to test the response from the reflection, the tension shown through the reactions of the face and body. At around five minutes there appears to be a delay in the reflection's movement until each dancer no longer follows the movement. The scene builds until finally the dancers identity seems to split into the two figures, the reflections colliding and beginning to physically struggle. The irrationality of the motion is a response to the dancers "struggle to recognise her 'self' as she "mimics the other figure, attempting to catch

[156] Focii, BFI Player, 2019.

[157] Marina Vishmidt (LUX, 2019) notes: "The original print was tinted aqua, as Iljon wanted to convey an effect of underwater slowness and reflections in the sea. Later prints do not have the tint".

her out with rapid, erratic movements, thereby creating a sense of unease."[158] This split of self is heightened through masks and props, the dancer seemingly questioning her own construction of identity. The scene then cuts away from the space, to show footage of two women intimately moving and exploring each others bodies, this end sequence is as "stylised as it is erotic, its excess signalling a plethora of possible readings."[159]

Jeanette Iljon, Focii, 1974.

It is the gradual transition of the dancer assuming "an autonomous identity"[160] with the mirror image that provides the narrative to the work. No narration or audio is heard, the silence of the film conflicting with the assumption that the dancer should be moving to music. The impact of *Focii* is a result of the representational imagery and the performative actions that the footage shows. The iconic references of the filmic properties are apparent through the grainy and dark aesthetic and the cuts of different angles and other footage, but it is the representational forms

[158] Gaal-Holmes, *A History Of 1970's Experimental Film*, 2015.
[159] Marina Vishmidt, Artist Focus: Jeanette Iljon, LUX Online, 2019. https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/jeanette_iljon/essay(5).html
[160] Focii, BFI Player, 2019.

that creates the impact of the work. The attention on the body's materiality "not only explores the construction of self, and the dynamics of self and other, but also the interaction between the viewer's body and the body onscreen, raising questions on the nature of identification in cinema".[161] The issue of identification is a thematic issue explored by many filmmakers of the co-operative, in both the early formal politics and the developments on the issue of form and content. Gidal's *Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film* outlines the call for "a demystificatory rejection of identification"[162] but in this sense, Gidal's approach was to be shown through a complete focus on materiality. In *Focii,* Iljon has challenged the role of identification through an ongoing narrative and an emphasis on representational movement rather than a completely abstracted process.

The expansion of forms that *Focii* represents and the collaboration between film and performance holds a significant impact on the new dialogue that can surround the Co-op. This development of understanding is most notably shown in the Tate Modern 2016 series *From Reel to Real: Women, Feminism and the London Film-Makers' Co-operative*. Iljon's work was screened in the discussions dedicated to *Filmic Bodies*, a selection of films by artists who;

> "reinscribe the messiness and transience of the body's materiality as a way to relate themselves to their medium and challenge the primacy of vision in cinema; they also conceive of the film itself as a body, one that is exposed in its fragility and subjected to the same intrusive interventions as the female body in our patriarchal culture."[163]

This exploration of the female identity and the reinterpretation of the filmmaker's relationship with the medium shows the extent of how the Structural/Materialist influence was unsettled by the representation found in feminist film practice. In *Focii*, Iljon has constructed a question of duality and identity through imagery. The power of the representation reflexivity is provoked

[161] Focii, BFI Player, 2019.
[162] Erika Balsom, "A 'New Face' at the Co-op", Tate Research Publication, 2015
[163] Tate Modern, Filmic Bodies, 2016, https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/film/reel-real-women-feminism-and-london-film-makers-co-operative/filmic-bodies

through the reflection and the journey from the beginning of the dancer's movement, to the collision of the two female identities, and the two 'selfs' meeting.

The constructed performative aspect of film is also dominant in Jayne Parker's work *Free Show* (1979). Much like Iljon's work, Parker's films intend to "see and understand what the body can do"[164], and this is executed in *Free Show* through a women's interaction with three domestic activities. With "each act prefaced by a short circus act"[165], the film is split into three sections of a staged performance in a controlled studio setting consisting of lighting equipment, cameras and a table. The entire film is printed in black and white and the main technical explorations comes through the different camera techniques such as changing angles and framing, depths of field, zoom and focus. This exploration of the filming devices gives the viewer a unique experience in the details of the act and adds to the intense portrayal of each action the women performs.

The first scene, 'Act I: Red Calypso', follows the action of cutting up meat (or "cutting liver" as both BFI and LUX suggests) performed by a woman whose name appears on screen, Clare R Winter, in the opening introduction to the film. The camera shots switch between wide angles of the studio to close up attention of the hands, knife and the texture of the pieces being cut. Very rarely does the camera settle on the scene as a whole, instead narrowing in on the actions being performed, and the objects being used. The repeated scratching and wiping of the woman's hands create an unease to the performance, as the scene continues to be interweaved with circus footage. Throughout the footage of the women continually cutting, Parker has combined it with the soundtrack of a jazz piece, *Mood Indigo* by Duke Ellington and Barney

[164] A.L Rees, "Jayne Parker", LUX Online, 2005. https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/jayne_parker/essay(6).html

[165] Free Show, BFI Player, 2019.

Bigard. The theatrical element to the work is intensified by the music, and as the acts transition, so does the music to a similar genre of songs.[166]

'Act II: Chrome' then transitions to the performance of the women repeatedly ironing a piece of fabric. Again, the attention on certain areas through the range of filming techniques that Parker use, adds a new dimension to the way the action is followed, at times completely out of focus. The blurred lights create a contrast with the dark space highlighting the difference between the monochromatic tones, most notable when the camera frames the woman's face. As she moves in out and of the shadows, the camera creates an intrusion into the woman's space and suggests a certain vulnerability. This vulnerability is contradicted by the aggressive motion of the ironing. When the first piece of material falls apart, the woman is immediately ironing a new roll. Again, the circus theme carries on throughout, and these cuts of footage and music adds a completely new dynamic to a usually mundane act. The almost irrational motion that the woman repeatedly uses further challenges the normality of the context and assumptions of carrying out this task.

[166] The songs that follow play throughout each scene: Act II "Its so hard to laugh or smile" by Bus Morten and Act III "Nasty Attitude" by Jay Mcshann.

Jayne Parker, Free Show, 1979.

'Act III: Little Box of Hooks', shows a more intimate relationship between the performer and camera. As the shots transition between the woman's face and hands, a close up angle of a pair of tweezers is introduced. As the woman plays with the object in her hands, she then approaches a mirror, looking directly at the camera holding the tweezer. This subtle switch of the gaze, back to the viewer, indicates a challenging acknowledgement and this reflexivity engages a new dialogue of the film. The scene then follows the woman plucking her own eyebrows, the viewer drawn to her individual features such as the eyes. The constant plucking starts to gather a sense of unease, much like the previous acts. Although not explicitly violent, each act indicates a potential change to these activities, all carried through the strength in the performance by the woman.

Free Show becomes another example of how the materiality of film still dictates the way in which the representation is constructed, but also shows how the wider contexts start to dominate the physicality of the process. In this film, it is the interplay between the camera

and the body that sets the structure of the film; "objects, performance and gesture were combined by the camera to explore space, duration and the physical body."[168] The attention towards the representation of the body opens *Free Show* up to many ideologies such as the challenge of the gaze and identification in cinema. The confrontational way in which Parker has staged the scene, is enhanced by the camera techniques, but is ultimately constructed through the representational reflexivity. The narratives formed through the physical responses to the body became a central concept for the Co-op filmmakers, and the contemporary importance of this thematic and contextual practice by members such as Parker, is shown through recent screenings of works. The 2017 screening titled *Bodies and Boundaries* at the AVANT Film festival featured *Free Show* and other films made by Parker, and specifically explored the context surrounding the female body as a "private territory and a social interface, a boundary that both divides and unites."[169] *Free Show* explores the social constructs of the body, and the placement of Iljon's work in today's exploration of film supports the distance of some of the Co-op work from the constructs of materiality. The tension between materiality and representation introduces "a symbolist narrative centered on performance, ritual and an almost surrealist sensibility."[170]

The documentary and diaristic forms at play in Vivienne Dick's *Guérillière Talks* (1978) show a progression towards stronger understandings of womanhood. Although this film comes before her activity directly as a Co-op member[171], it echoes the processes being explored by the London Co-op at this time. *Guérillière Talks* follows an "unruly cast of artists and

[168] A.L Rees, "Jayne Parker", LUX Online, 2005. https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/jayne_parker/essay(6).html

[169] Bodies and Boundaries, AVANT Film Festival 2017, https://www.avantfilm.se/avant-2017-bodies-and-boundaries/

[170] Micheal O'Pray, *Avant-Garde: Film, Forms and Passion,* 108.

[171] Dick was first instrumental in the development of the New York's No Wave film scene, *Guerrillere Talks* (1978) made before she became part of the Co-op in 1985.

musicians"[172] through short clips that undergo many formal transformations such as the permutations of colour, changing camera angles and dark contrasts. The use of these devices work alongside the format of the "rolls of super-8 sound footage"[173], the work becoming "structured as a series of separate documents."[174] Each roll of film runs at around three minutes, the use of Super-8 drawing attention to the material of the filmstock which is made most prominent by the way in which each film roll is split by the "chorus of red and white Kodak leader."[175] The leader, printed in red on a white background, reads PROCESSED BY KODAK; the letters passing by feeling similar to the effect of drawing directly on film, and splits up the printing transformations, each documentary shown through a different lens of colour. The different hues reflect not only the technical transformations possible, but the changing structure and subject of the footage and context.

Rather than the 16mm industrial format that formed much of the Co-op's experiments, Dick has explored the filmic possibilities of Super 8. Advancing from the unsplit Standard 8 film, Super 8 signified a shift in filming qualities and the editing process. Super 8 provides a shift in format, the dimensions of the filmic exposure greater than the normal 8mm film. In an interview with Scott Macdonald in the Spring 1982 issue of *October* magazine, Dick discusses the choice of using this format:

> "MacDonald: Did you originally want to work in super-8 rather than 16mm, or was the choice practical economics?
> Dick: It was economics maybe first of all. I did do a little bit of 16mm over at Rafique's [OP Screen] after the time when I worked at Millennium. But it seemed like super-8 was much more modern. You had to wind the 16mm camera up, and there was no sound on it. And all that cutting up and everything. I did this little ten-minute film. I got as far as editing the work print, but I just couldn't be bothered with

[172] *Guérillière Talks*, BFI Player, 2019.
[173] Jim Hoberman, "A Context for Vivienne Dick" October, (1982): 101.
[174] Maeve Connolly, "Vivienne Dick", LUX Online, 2005. https://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/vivienne_dick/essay(1).html
[175] Jim Hoberman, "A Context for Vivienne Dick", 102.

> finishing it. It seemed like so much trouble - A and B rolls and everything. Super-8 was just much handier."[176]

The economic and stylistic decisions of artists' such as Dick shows the shift within the late 1970's and early 1980's from "the impact of cheap super-8 technology."[177] Although this format had been "introduced onto the market in the mid 1960's as a domestic format"[178] it was not until the end of the decade that it really had an impact on the printing and filming processes of using 16mm film. This in turn shifted the dynamic of the Co-op spaces; "the introduction of Super 8 and video perversely liberated filmmakers from the supposedly free 'means of production' of the 16mm optical printer – work could be made outside of the Co-op and the space used for performance and exhibition."[179] The use of Super-8 in *Guérillière Talks* shows the changing scope of possibilities by artists such as Dick. Although this film can be placed amongst the context of the New York super-8 film makers, "popularly known as punks"[180], Dick's material exploration has many links to the work taking place at the London Co-operative.

> "In many respects, it recalls the ''structural-materialist'' aesthetic associated with filmmakers Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice. But Guérillière Talks is less concerned with the material properties of film than with an exploration of performance and identity through the voices of its characters."[181]

The Structural/Materialist tendencies is evident in the experiments of *Guérillière Talks* but the distance from the purely materialist functions is set by Dick's bold style of brash punk aesthetics. Each division that structure the work, creates a "sort of screen test for Dick's female

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[176] Scott MacDonald, "Interview with Vivienne Dick", October, (1982): 87.

[177] Michael O'Pray, "Moving On: British Avant-Garde Film in the Late 70's and Early 80's", LUX, 2017.

[178] Michael O'Pray, "Moving On: British Avant-Garde Film in the Late 70's and Early 80's", LUX, 2017.

[179] Matthew Noel-Tod, "Soft Floor, Hard Film", *Frieze*, 2016.

[180] Jim Hoberman, "A Context for Vivienne Dick", 102. Hoberman also expands on the punks' ethos joined together "by their unequivocal rejection of structural filmmaking and academic film."

[181] Maeve Connolly, "Sighting an Irish Avant-Garde in the Intersection of Local and International Film Cultures", Project Muse (2004): 245.

subjects"[182] and it is Dick's personal encounter with the women that comes to the forefront of the film. Her raw encounters with each of the personas bring light to the portrayal of each character whilst also hinting towards a social context in which the recording were made. Through the ease of the Super 8 format, Dick explains the experimental way she approached each subject; "We'd choose a location, and the camera would either remain steady or I'd play around with it, experimenting. It was an easy way to start. I picked people I was interested in, sometimes people I didn't know."[183] The subjects include "Beate Nilsen, Ikue Mori, Lydia Lunch, Pat Place, Adele Bertei, and Anya Philips"[184] and by focusing on women who were prominent within the punk or underground scene, the film holds much social reference and emulates the Guerrilla style that the film contextualises. The work takes its title from "Monique Wittig's feminist novel *Les Guérillières"* [185] and serves as a hint towards the Women's Liberation Movement and the critical theories and feminist implication that *Les Guérillières* has become known.

[182] Jim Hoberman, "A Context for Vivienne Dick", 102.

[183] Scott MacDonald, "Interview with Vivienne Dick", 85. Dick later expands on her decision to focus on women as the central characters; "When we were talking about that film based on Les Guérillières we wanted only women in the movie. We were all thinking along those lines. Part of the movie was going to be about women getting harassed in the street" (89).

[184] *Guérillière Talks,* LUX, 2019.

[185] Maeve Connolly, "Vivienne Dick", LUX Online, 2005.

Vivienne Dick, Guérillière Talks, 1978.

The use of representational imagery defines this work and although there are some effects in place, the actual run time of the footage is unedited, adding to the natural encounters and social commentary that *Guérillière Talks* employs. Throughout, conventional narrative is still defied through the accompanying soundtrack of music and spoken word that has no narrational guidance, giving the viewer the freedom in their interpretation of each clip. The viewer is placed in the position of the filmmaker, following Dick's filming of the subjects. This in turn creates an interaction "where the camera is co-conspirator rather than voyeur"[186] and it is this active experience that also alters the idea of the gaze. Rather than implications being towards the male gaze, each woman portrayed becomes the result of an expressive insight dictated by the women themselves. Through the representational footage and iconic references, there are undertones that bring into question the representation of women, "juxtaposing various examples of female self-definition against the backdrop of a decaying social order."[187]

[186] Artist Film Surveys: Vivienne Dick, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2011. https://archive.ica.art/whats-on/artists-film-surveys-vivienne-dick

[187] Jim Hoberman, "A Context for Vivienne Dick", 102.

As the language of the expanded narratives and representation started to shift, Susan Stein's *G* (1979) directly looks at the use of feminist language within film. *G* "shows a typewriter from a variety of angles, punctuating the images with the almost abstracted sounds of a clock, typing and a monologue"[188] and it is the fading in and out of images, alongside the complex layering of spoken word and sound that structures the film. Adopting perhaps the most formal approach out of these five filmmakers, Stein's film stretches the representational footage through filmic devices such as high contrasts, repeated sequences and changes in speed, direction and depth of field. The whole imagery is processed in black and white, the monochromatic effect accentuating the contrasts and transitions between image and angle. The typewriter is the central focus of the work, the punches of the typing running alongside the disjointed monologue. Acting almost as a motif, the typewriter links the confrontation of language to the referential imagery of books and scenes of full clips of script writing. The light and contrasts change the clarity of the imagery, shifting the coding of the footage from abstract to representational and back again. The film closes with the focus on a pair of tights and knees, the textures of the tights and the forms of the body. Throughout these encounters of sounds that echo that of the imagery of clock's and typerwriters, Stein's own voice and her experiments of words and language creates the overtone of the film's soundtrack.

The way that Stein plays around with language and cross references this with visual focus on books, newspaper cuttings and the typewriter, develops her own narrative. The progression through the alphabet is impacted through moments of silence between the words, and through moments of completely light or dark screen. The changes in speed and time between each word lingers for the viewer to contemplate. This contemplation is driven by Stein's own narration,

[188] G, BFI Player, 2019.

the impact of the female voice hinting towards the wider contexts that are being explored. In films like *G*, Stein "examines language in the context of the femme-led writings and political movement of the time, and in contrast with the grainy imagery of her sensitive cinematography."[190] A tension is created between the collages and layers of her visual experimentation with the personal insight and exploration of the language she is using as a female filmmaker. Stein reconstructs the referent through a mix of technical devices and narrational cues, and the wider context implied changes the meaning of words and the coding of imagery.

At the time of *G*, Stein played a key role in the Co-operative, acting as a workshop coordinator as Nicky Hamlyn recalls; "in my first year (1979) duties were shared with Jeanette Iljon, a former RCA film student, who was replaced the following year by Susan Stein....workshop worker's duties were many and varied, but consisted, most importantly, in running the Lawley Junior black and white processing machine, which was the only piece of equipment members were not allowed to operate."[191] The processing machines remained as important to the work of Stein and the Co-op in 1979 as it did in 1969. Stein's complex understanding of the film's materiality and frame rates allowed for her experiments to go beyond physical boundaries and towards a film dictated by language.

[190] Freedom Over Fear: Susan Stein's Feminist Avant-Garde Cinema, Experimental Cinema, 2018. https://expcinema.org/site/en/events/freedom-over-fear-susan-stein%E2%80%99s-feminist-avant-garde-cinema

[191] Nicky Hamlyn, "Memoirs of a London Filmmakers' Co-op Workshop Worker". LUX, 2016.

Susan Stein, G, 1979.

The viewing experience dictated by Stein and the use of fading and contrasts echoes that of some of the reflexive mode of filmmaking featured within the formal direction of film. "For the audience, a process of assessment and prediction seems to be essential to a reflexive concept of cinema"[193] and the disjointed sequences of silence, spoken word and other sounds that provokes the audience in actively experiencing the work. The expanded forms of viewing would be evident in the direct impact on the audience from the contrast between light and dark.[194] This again provides another example of how far removed the digitisation of the film on the BFI Player is, from the intended mode of viewing. The impact of the projected footage within a space would completely change the viewing experience and bring a closer connection with the material changes and the layering of sounds.

[193] Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond*, 139.

[194] Freedom Over Fear: Susan Stein's Feminist Avant-Garde Cinema, Experimental Cinema, 2018, 'The film also uses a pulse of fades…giving the film a feeling of disappearance, while the clear aspects light up the audience's faces'.

As with other filmmakers such as Parker and Iljon, the influence of Stein is recognised through contemporary acknowledgment of the Co- op's work. Tate Modern screened *Trapped in Language* in 2016, a "series of films where some "reveal and destabilise the gender and racial positions firmly inscribed in the structures and conventions of language; others question its communicative boundaries, raising issues of linguistic and cultural translations."[195] *G*'s inclusion within this screening is a result of its confrontational relationship with the structure of linguistics and challenging of boundaries set within a feminist context. It is the alignment with emerging narratives of gender issues and feminist voice that sets the tone for *G*, and much of Stein's work. The subtlety of the context of the body and the recurring motif of the typewriter means a "much quieter protest takes place in *G*, in which woman's hands and their deliberate movement on a typewriter echo Rhodes and Davis's demand for a woman's intellectual space.[196]

The "increased politicisation"[197] of the Co-op and the redefining of narrative can be found in *Sentimental Journey* (1977), the second film in Anne Rees-Mogg's "autobiographical, diaristic trilogy."[198] Although not explicitly feminist in its intention, the examination of wider social issues and the exploration of process combines to create her own identity as a women filmmaker and the culmination of the impact of reflexive techniques. *Sentimental Journey is* split into two parts; the first "consists of arguments about how to make films and what film to make,"[199] the second debate continues "about houses and planning, with shots of the

[195] Tate Modern, Trapped in Language, 2016. https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/film/reel-real-women-feminism-and-london-film-makers-co-operative/trapped

[196] Ela Bittencourt, "A Celebration of Overlooked Women Filmmakers," *Frieze*, 2018.

[197] Patti Gaal-Holmes, "Decade of diversity: A History of 1970s British Experimental Film", PhD diss.,(University of Portsmouth, 2013).

[198] Patti Gaal- Holmes, 1970s British Experimental Film: Images in Shadows and Light, MIRAJ (2016): 17.

[199] Sentimental Journey, BFI Player, 2019.

destruction of a house."[200] The dialogue of the two parts is distinguished by the topic in which it challenges, and through the aesthetics of the filming and processing. The first fifteen minutes are shown in colour, before the rest of the film switches to black and white. It is this direct change in contrast, along with the shift in subject matter, that creates the structure of the film. Although the work undergoes technical transformations such as colour changes, short cuts, and repeated movements, the materiality comes second to the way in which Rees-Mogg dictates the reflexivity of the process. The reflexive mode of *Sentimental Journey* unfolds through the narration of the filmmaking process, and through the visual changes of representational footage. As the film responds to the narration, the context then widens beyond 8mm, Super 8 and 16mm filmmaking, and towards a social issue that Rees-Mogg cleverly intertwines with continued experimentation of representation, narrative and materiality.

As the first section of the film progress the footage follows many different scenes, the viewer watches the filming unfold through the eye of the filmmaker. The visual transitions are guided by the overriding narration that becomes cut with moments of extended silence, the narrative linking visual changes to the process described and giving a wider context to the work. Of her experimentation between sound and image, Rees-Mogg states the less literary style of her soundtracks; "I write from one notebook to another. I don't script something totally beforehand"[201] and this is evident in the playful narration and composition of the filmed footage. The footage continually mixes between people and environments, short cuts and long scenes, and between still and moving shots. This combination of imagery and medium points towards Rees-Mogg's understanding of filmmaking but rather than just repeating the exploration of the structures prominent in Co-op films, it was instead the "more personal

[200] Sentimental Journey, BFI Player, 2019.
[201] Janey Walkin, "Interview with Anne Rees-Mogg" in *Undercut Reader,* 74.

autobiographical/biographical aspect that became much more important."[202] She allows the viewer to see her role of filmmaker, editor and director and although the narration switches between voices, the most dominate is Rees-Mogg's own. The soundtrack provides a direct comment of process and ultimately how she, as a filmmaker, connects to her own work.

Anne Rees-Mogg, Sentimental Journey, 1977.

The change in the film comes after a prolonged section filled with music. When the voice returns, a dialogue is entered between Rees-Mogg and a fellow filmmaker discussing the topic of content: "I want to make a film with content."[203] This marks the change to a critical view of the council and government response to housing, planning and the question of open space. As the film becomes monochrome, the narration continues, relaying debates about housing and planning, with references to a house, "object by owner/occupier Anne Rees-Mogg."[204] The direct relationship that is made by the mention of Rees-Mogg's name, further strengthens the connection with her work, and with the viewer watching. Intercut with closely shot footage of

[202] Janey Walkin, "Interview with Anne Rees-Mogg" in *Undercut Reader*, 72.
[203] Sentimental Journey, BFI Player, 2019.
[204] Sentimental Journey, BFI Player, 2019.

objects and people, this second part of the film is dominated by the developing footage of a house being demolished. The context of the visual imagery towards the confrontation of a social issue is guided by the monologue style soundtrack. As sound and image continue to connect, the film repeats extracts from housing documents and includes "shots from other films of the house it used to be."[205]

This mix of personal and social reflection has undertones of Rees-Mogg's playful experimentation and holds a "a sense of ironic self-questioning, also evident in the jerky, repeated phrases of instruction or discussions on filmmaking." [206] Observational yet confrontational, *Sentimental Journey* feels like a challenge to the conventions of Structural/Materialist ideas through showing visual representation rather abstract materiality. The film also acknowledges the collaborative mode filmmaking inherent in the LFMC.

> "Watching Anne Rees-Mogg's films, one quickly becomes aware of a particular duality: the films' formal preoccupations show their links with the English avant-garde movement grouped around the London Film-Makers Co-op, while, on the other hand, the films have an intense personal quality, an originality that is completely their own."[207]

This duality that Mulvey refers to is shown in the structure of *Sentimental Journey*. Throughout there are transitions between Rees-Mogg's individual interference with the process, whilst inviting the viewer to discover the other contributions of filmmakers involved with the Co-op such as Chris Welsby. The film becomes a documentation that follows a context of the mid 1970s in terms of its position within the Co-op and filmmaking, and the critical commentary to surrounding social and political issues. Credited by Laura Mulvey as giving a "fresh

[205] Sentimental Journey, BFI Player, 2019.
[206] Gaal-Holmes, *A History Of 1970's Experimental Film*, 124.

[207] Laura Mulvey, "Laura Mulvey on Anne Rees-Mogg", LUX Online, 2005. https://www.luxonline.org.uk/articles/anne_rees-mogg(1).html

confidence that women can work in and through the avant-garde to create a characteristic women's cinema, in which personal, formal and political (in the broad feminist sense) are combined,"[208] Rees-Mogg also created a distance from the feminist wave. In an interview with Janey Walkin in *Undercut Reader*, Rees-Mogg is critical of the stylistic decisions of other films and the conventionalised way "soundtrack and images are constructed in recent women films"[209]:

> JW: I wonder what you feel about the debate on what constitutes women's filmmaking or the language, of feminist cinema?
> AR: I feel that a lot of the women - English women - are probably too didactic, the irony, or humour is rather lacking, and I don't reject is, but I don't want to be identified as part of a feminist film aesthetic.[210]

Even with this insight into her process, *Sentimental Journey* still holds a place in the era of "recent feminist re-evaluation of such 'home movie-like material"[211] and Rees-Mogg's work becomes deeply explorative of feminine subjectivity shown through a focus on memories, time and personal reflection. The reflection on filmmaking acts as not only a comment on the Co-op's dominant aesthetic ideologies, but as a reaction to it. The representation and the narration shows the expressive and expansive structures that defy conventional documentary or cinematic styles and it is the reflexive lens that allows the viewer to stay closer to the reflexive ideology.

The organisation still provided a platform for filmmakers to produce work, but as the language of these films started to change, and the issues in which they were confronting, so did the dynamic of the Co-op itself. The communal aspect of the collective activity has long defined the character of the LFMC, though the perceived egalitarian vision started to become displaced.

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[208] Laura Mulvey, "Laura Mulvey on Anne Rees-Mogg", LUX Online, 2005.
[209] Janey Walkin, "Interview with Anne Rees-Mogg" in *Undercut Reader*, 74
[210] Janey Walkin, "Interview with Anne Rees-Mogg" in *Undercut Reader*, 74.
[211] Laura Mulvey, "Laura Mulvey on Anne Rees-Mogg", LUX Online, 2005.

By the end of 1979, the changing state was marked by many of the women filmmakers associated with the Co-op (such as Lis Rhodes, Felicity Sparrow, Jeannette Iljon and Susan Stein), breaking away from the organisation to form Circles: Women's Film and Video Distribution Organisation. In part building from the "LFMC feminist discussion group and London's interconnected feminist spaces"[212] that were growing throughout the 1970s, Circles was also a response to the marginalisation of women filmmakers and the limitations of the film as film notion. The co-operative seemed to grow with the feminist challenges. A year before the formation of Circles, it was the Co-op that hosted a weeklong film screening titled *Feminism, Fiction and the Avant-Garde* (1978), which provided a backdrop for experiments lined with a feminist confidence. The films shown in the screening, "...attested to the existence of a vital experimental film culture by women, which embraced their diversities of voice, narrative and performance, in a manner extending joyfully beyond *Film as Film*'s Modernist parameters"[213] and it is this extension away from the formalist tendencies that can redefine how the Co-op is explored.

By considering these moments of change within the Co-op's activity, it can provide a context to the growing feminist agenda hints towards an "engagement with the subjective with narrative and experimentation."[214] This is not to reduce the works by female filmmakers under a restrictive feminist label, or to reduce the processes explored by artists like Eatherley, Rees-Mogg or Stein. Instead, the focus on a feminine materiality becomes one way of connecting process with representational reflexivity. The films within this latter period of the 70's became

[212] Sophie Mayer and Selina Robertson, "Joined together, there is power, sister': Re-viewing feminist work from the London Film-makers' Co-operative", *Aniki: Revista Portugesa da Imagem em Movimento*, (2017): 223.

[213] Lucy Reynolds, Whose History? Feminist Advocacy and Experimental Film and Video in *Other Cinemas: Politics, Culture and Experimental Film in the 1970s,* eds., Sue Clayton and Laura Mulvey (2017): 140.

[214] Sophie Mayer and Selina Robertson, "Joined together, there is power, sister', 224.

increasingly preoccupied with the concept of the body and women "as a subject of inquiry, a context which cannot be considered within the aesthetic lines laid down by traditional cinematic practice."[215] These works cannot be placed under the scope of a complete abandonment of narrative or imagery, and the range of contextual experimentation shows the versality of the filmmaker's approach, allowing a space to reconsider the overarching intentions that are often applied to the Co-op's activity.

[215] Laura Mulvey, "Film Feminism and the Avant-Garde", 211.

Conclusion

> "The work that emerged from and surrounded the London Film-Makers' Co-operative is crucial both to the study of British cinema as a whole and of an international avant-garde centred on co-operatives and collectives, but also to the continuities and evolution of feminist film practice and theory and their imbrication in political activism."
>
> *Sophie Mayer and Selina Robertson, 'Joined together there is power, sister': Re-viewing feminist work from the London Film-makers' Co-operative, 2016.*

Despite an increasing recognition of the role that women filmmakers played during the 1970's, there has still been space for my research to re-examine the role of representational reflexivity, and ultimately challenge the domination of the Co-op's constructed narrative towards materiality. The reflexive lens was central to both abstract and representational modes of filmmaking, but this reflexivity shifted in its political, social and referential impact. This shift is explored through the fifteen films discussed in this thesis, identifying both the parallel nature of the two reflexive forms, but also the transitions towards expanded processes and wider contextual concerns. The first chapter highlighted the formal thinking that set the Co-op's agenda, the films underlined by the strong polemical ideology of the Structural/Materialist practice Through Gidal's argument for a truly material practice it has been possible to identify how the application of 'social' and 'representation' changed in relation to the Co-op films' and question the early concrete ideas that saw representation as problematic. The.social construction against representation and narrational processes within formal films manifested through the distinct exploration of the filmic image, marked by anti-illusionary structures and often visualised through abstracted forms. Within the early works of Crosswaite and Du Cane, the techniques came to define the very position of the avant-garde; a position that marked the direct social opposition to conventional cinematic forms, contained with a reflexive response to filmmaking itself. The Structural/Materialist concepts in Gidal's *Structural Film Anthology*

(1976/1978) continue to remain a strong critical outline of the LFMC's framework. The domination of Gidal's writing, alongside Malcolm Le Grice's *Abstract Film and Beyond* (1977) should not be overlooked, but it should not be the ideologies that control the understanding of the content and narratives that came from the Co-op. The retrospective placement of much of the critical engagement with medium-specificity and abstract forms contrasts with the timeline of the case studies in this thesis, the ideas published when the actual moment of formal materiality had passed. It is this delay in the critical engagement that means the ideological documenting of collective work of the Co-op is slightly misplaced, and that the actual collection of the films themselves, explain the practice more truly than the reflective theoretical writings at the time.

The second chapter that acknowledges the question of content, and the possibility of the academic engagement and practical modes of filmmaking existing away from the formal abstract approach. Evident in the early films of Fred Drummond (*Showerproof*, 1968) and Gill Eatherley (*Deck,* 1971), the Co-op introduced the mix of referential footage, narrational soundtracks and image-rich content into their works, stretching the possibilities of the social impact within experimental film. Through using more openly representational forms to visualise personal expression, the move towards anthropomorphic forms, landscape influences and expanded performative elements started to filter through the purely abstract works. As stated throughout, the filmic medium remained a focal concern for all artists at the Co-op, but these processes became realised through a combination of both materiality and the referential, rather than a complete separation. There are many crossovers between the techniques in each case study – rephotography, permutations of colour, filmic grain etc. – but the dialogues began to move between formalism, subject matter and the semiology of the language. The work on the signifier and the signified in the Co-op films were constantly extending the films

relationship with the viewer. From Raban's expanded multi screens (*Angles of Incidence*, 1973), to Parker's uncomfortable acts shown to the audience (*Free Show*, 1979), the way the filmic images can be read changes the language of the films and ultimately influences a different social effect on the audience. These films set the Co-op's reflexive language within an important cultural shift, there becoming little distance from the signification that the filmic image holds.

The third chapter explored how this context pushed the filmic structures and aesthetics towards a social and gender driven mode of filmmaking and confronting the limitations that material film can have. The combination of reflexive and feminist narratives had the biggest impact on shaping the wider concerns of the Co-op throughout the 70's. There is no linear development of the introduction of referential and representational forms, but the example of films from 1974-1979 show how contemporary reflections of the Co-op's work can be considered through a feminist lens. The implications of representational reflexivity alongside feminist film criticisms are not indeed to form links between modes of expression and binary gender categories, but instead as an example of how the transitions in the filmic processes became increasingly removed from formal abstract film. For instance, even Malcolm Le Grice, who was at the centre of exploration in materiality became more explorative of narrative works. His 1979 film *Emily – Third Party Speculation*, which shows repeated cuts of a domestic scene, moves into a complex mix of process and representation. Le Grice also identified a change in his practice earlier than this;

> "The next phase began with a return to performance represented within the film – After Lumiere (1974) and After Manet (1975) – and proceeded to the three-feature length single screen films that explored a minimal form of narrative. During this period I explored issues of the language of film, its semiology, the notion of its grammar and

> tense formation, identification with represented characters and with camera viewpoints."[219]

There are other examples such as William Raban's *Breath* (1974) and Roger Hewin's *Windowframe* (1975) on the BFI Player that show an openness to representation from male artists, but I can continue to speculate that the trend still lies behind the actions of the female filmmakers. Rather than being a *result* of the gender related agenda, representational reflexivity *enabled* the feminist consciousness to form within film and away from the masculine dominated material reflexivity.

The material reflexive modes of the early works became locked into a particular way of working through the optical printer. Moving away from the modernist framework, the indexical processes of the Co-op films were impacted with a context towards a postmodern expansion of representation and the increasing tension between the signifier and signified.[220] Female filmmakers began to work with a freedom that created a challenge to Structural/Materialist ideas, the representational reflexivity becoming more culturally loaded, specifically against the lack of representation of women in film, and the societal struggles that women faced. These shifts in experiments continued to expand the semiosis within film, directed through the changing landscape of women filmmakers, and the duality of the sign;

> "Semiotics foregrounds language and emphasises both the crucial importance of the signifier (for a long time overlooked and subordinated to the signified) and the dual nature of the sign, thus suggesting the aesthetic mileage that can be gained by play on separation between its two aspects. For feminists this split has a triple action: aesthetic fascination with discontinuities; pleasure from disrupting the traditional unity of the sign; and theoretical advance from investigating language and the production of meaning."[221]

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[219] Malcolm Le Grice, "Reflections on my practice and media specificity" *in Experimental Film and Video: An Anthology*, eds., Jackie Hatfield (2006): 220.

[220] Catherine Russell (Experimental Ethnography, 4): "parallel to an increasing interdisciplinary interest in visual culture, experimental filmmaking is flourishing within a post colonial, post modern context."

[221] Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Palgrave Macmillian: London (1989/2009): 122.

It is this advancement in film criticism from Mulvey that can be echoed when applying semiotics to the Co-op's engagement; "this semiotics expansion - rather than the reductionist line Peter Gidal took - would be essential for engaging with feminist discourses." The extended possibilities of reading the filmic signs marks the approach that again distanced the LFMC from the Structural/Materialist agenda and towards current issues of gender and politics, impacting the way the films at the Co-op are perceived and understood. Mulvey's *Film, Feminist and the Avant-garde* (1978), alongside Rhode's *Whose History* (1979) impacted the discourse of academic engagement, which has since gathered significant momentum. Contemporary literature on 1970's Co-op still poses a disparity between what was being published at the same time as the development and wave of feminist consciousness, but building on works like Mulvey's and Rhodes', an increasing number of critical journals, screenings and retrospect of the Co-op's work directly focus on the impact of female filmmakers. Recent contemporary anthologies such as Laura Mulvey and Sue Clayton's *Other Cinemas: politics, culture and experimental film in the 1970s (2017)* and Jackie Hatfield's *Experimental Film and Video: An Anthology* (2006) contain key texts that reflect the changing climate, most notably Lucy Reynolds *Whose History? Feminist Advocacy and Experimental Film and Video* and Vicky Smith's *Moving Parts: The Divergence of Practice.*[222] Through writings such as these, the changing perception of the 1970's avant-garde has been re-understood, and the importance of issues such as gendered identification and the representation of women has become difficult to set aside from the Co-op films.

> "In addition to attempting to situate the unique contribution of the women film-makers associated with the LFMC in relation to both experimental and feminist film, I argue that the LFMC's particular relationship with filmic materiality led the women film-makers to apprehend cinematic spectatorship but also subjectivity, the body or one's

[222] *Undercut Reader: Critical Writings on Artists' Film and Video* also shows a progression towards feminist ideologies, most evident in Linda Cartwright's work: on representation and sexual division – an interview with Christine Delphy.

> relationship with the other in ways that can be productively explored in the light of recent developments in both film and feminist theory."[223]

Mauve Jacquin's reflection (in response to the *From Reel to Real: Women, Feminism and the London Film-Makers' Co-operative* 2016 exhibition at Tate), pushes to redefine and connect the materiality towards the thematic changes and the self-reflexive reality constructed by women filmmakers. I have been able to build on the reflections of contemporary research and screenings to map my own insight into the technical and contextual implications of the LFMC work. The intent to map the visual experimentations from the mode of materiality to reflexive and representational forms is built upon an engagement with the medium that focuses on semiotical investigations. Semiotics is important in reflecting the changes in cultural shifts and language; these social changes are not happening independently from visual language which makes it particularly relevant as a research method. The close analysis of each film approaches the formal properties such as light, grain, depth and dissects the reflexive systems in place, making it possible to identify the changing material contexts and how the social and political motivations are reflected by the artists. The visual examinations have been supported by the Co-op's placement within the changing social contexts and through the understanding of the artists' individual works amid theoretical developments such as feminist film criticism. Each member has shaped the thinking of this era of filmmaking and through their films and writing have created an awareness into the technical and contextual decisions of each film.

The Co-op continued to exceed the parameters of filmmaking set by its own artists. By challenging the foundations of the 1970's framework, it has been possible to find a separation from the egalitarian vision through the constructions of a feminist agenda. The changing dynamic, following moments such as the formation of Circles, has a direct impact with the

[223] Maud Jacquin, "From Reel to Real – an epilogue: Feminist politics and materiality at the London Filmmakers' Co-operative", MIRAJ (2017): 81.

continued expansion of experiments during the 80's and 90's. Much of the research on the London Filmmakers Co-operative is still heavily weighted to the first decade of activity but even with this extensive coverage, there can be an increasing awareness of how the different modes of filmmaking began to change within an increasingly social and political space. The foundations of the practical and theoretical contexts that I have highlighted throughout this thesis do not need to be completely cast aside but they can be reconsidered to grasp the true extent of how experiments in both materiality and representation created a reflexivity that pushed experimental film beyond the boundaries of medium-specificity.

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